ARGOSY

DEC. 4

ALL-STORY WEEKLY

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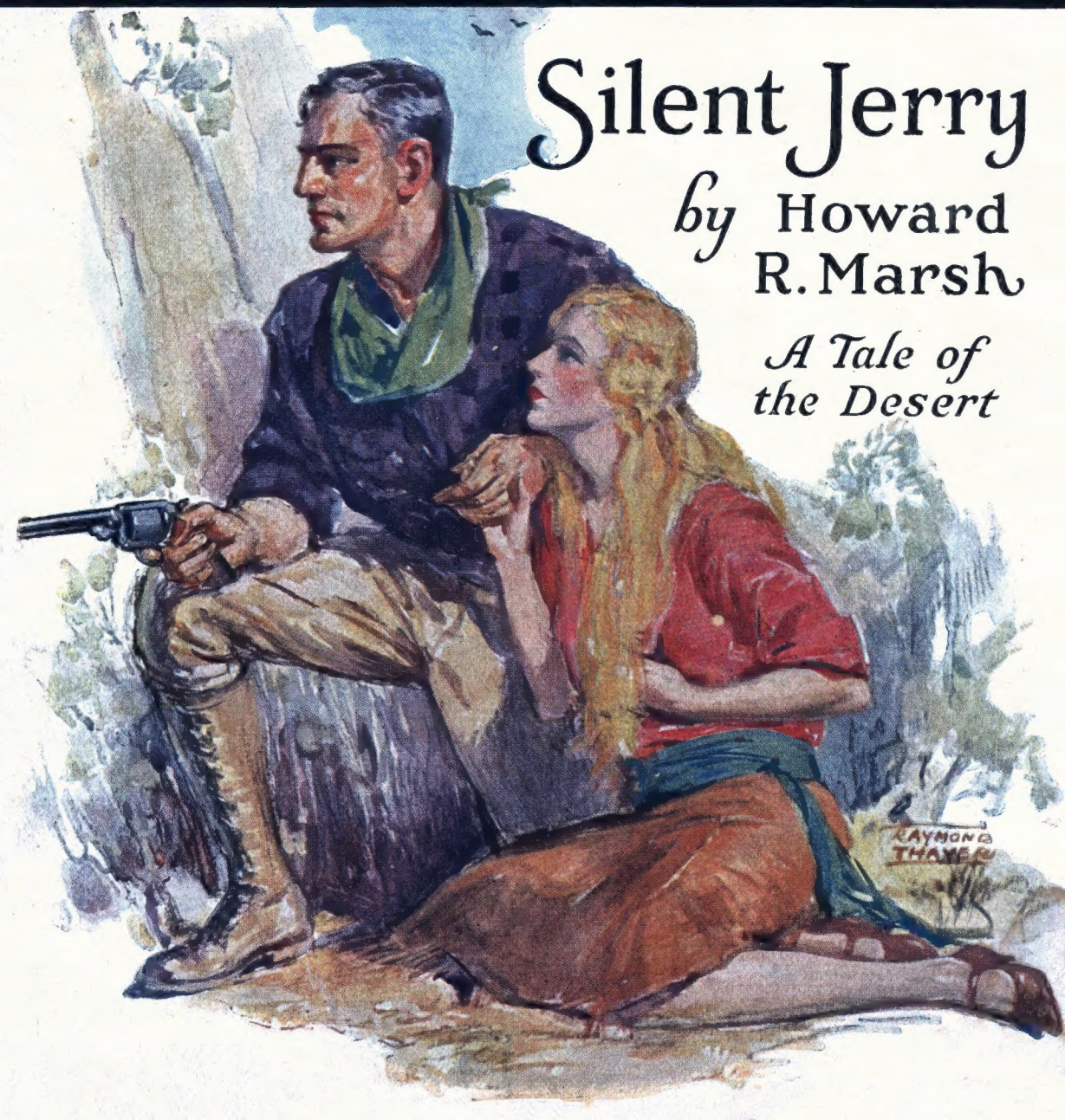

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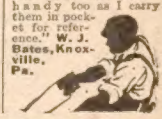

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY

VOL. CLXXXII CONTENTS FOR DECEMBER 4, 1926 NUMBER 3

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FOUR CONTINUED STORIES

Silent Jerry . . . . . Howard R. Marsh . . . 321
A Three-Part Story — Part One

War Spawn . . . . . May Wilmoth 381
A Five-Part Story — Part Two

Roll Your Own . . . . . Edgar Franklin 413
A Four-Part Story — Part Three

The Devil's Saddle . . . . . Kenneth Perkins 443
A Six-Part Story — Part Six

NOVELETTE AND SHORT STORIES

Excitement Trail . . . . . George M. Johnson . . . 346
Up . . . . . Richard Barry 405
The Gray Shadow . . . . . Frank Richardson Pierce . 438
Prisoners of Debt . . . . . Beatrice Ashton Vandegrift . 463
Willie Off the Pickle Boat . . . . Gordon Stiles 471

POETRY

Memory . . . . . Edgar Daniel Kramer 345
Trek! . . . . . E. Leslie Spaulding 380
The House of Joy . . . . H. R. Bangs 442
Say It With a Smile . . . Tom Withrow 412
Hail to Winter . . . . . Vella Truitt 437

The Reader's Viewpoint 479

Society intrigue and the swift life of Long Island will be depicted in

A WILD PURSUIT

By FRED MACISAAC

Beginning next week, it tells how a small-town girl disappears in a great city.

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PARIS: HACHETTE & CIE., 111 Rue Reaumur
WILLIAM T. DEWART, President and Treasurer RICHARD H. TITHERINGTON, Vice-President and Secretary
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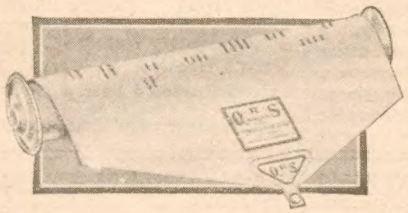

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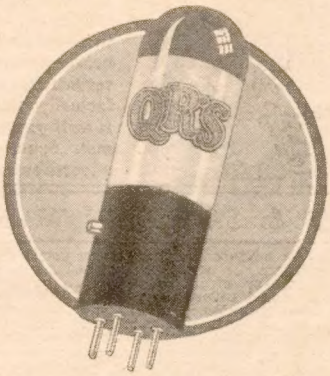

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Classified Advertising

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is to put the reader in touch immediately with the newest needfuls for the home, office, farm, or person; to offer, or seek, an unusual business opportunity, or to suggest a service that may be performed satisfactorily through correspondence. It will pay a housewife or business man equally well to read these advertisements carefully.

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Classified Advertising continued on page 6.

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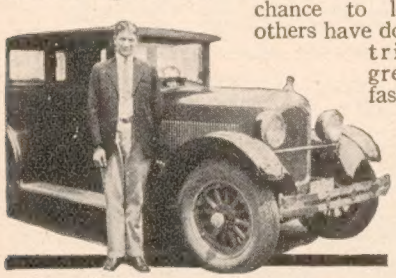

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY
WEEKLY

VOL. CLXXXII SATURDAY, DECEMBER 4, 1926 NUMBER 3

Silent Jerry

By HOWARD R. MARSH

CHAPTER I.

SUN-BURNED HELL.

"SEE it, Tin Can?" demanded Jerome Starley of his little burro. "Down there below, that dodging black thing. Looks like a man, doesn't it? Yes, sir, a crazy man trying to dive and swim in the alkali sand. See it, Tin Can?"

From the edge of Juniper Mesa the desert man stared intently across the sea of creosote and sage which rolled below him to the far horizons. Stalwart, weathered, motionless, he became an integral part of the rugged landscape, hewn, perhaps, from the sun-reddened granite walls behind him.

His huge hands shaded his eyes from the aching calcium rays of the noonday sun; his long body tilted forward, poised, awaiting the decision of his mind.

In the painful, unshadowed white glare the Mojave Desert unfolded before him, dancing and shifting as if it were a scene painted on a wind-shaken canvas. Heat waves rose from the gray-white sand, quivering layer upon layer. They blurred the outline of the creosote and incense bushes, blended imperceptibly with the bleached feathery stalks of sun-dried sage.

The palpitating air was a veil which contorted all the outlines of that waste land, a veil which threw every object into motion. Bowlders, dazzlingly white under the sun's rays, shook and shifted; Joshua trees, flora epitome of that heat-wracked region, waved their tortured, stunted arms; a black lava streak, gashed across the distant sand, rolled and pitched like a crested wave.

Even the mountains in front of him, the far-away Panamint and Slate ranges, heaved their mighty bulks and shimmied into a menacing dance.

Jerome Starley ignored the false motion of the landscape. It was an old story to him, this eternal, mighty trembling of land, and rock, and air. He was interested only in that real motion on the desert floor below him. If that black figure down there, crawling and pitching grotesquely through the regularly-spaced creosote, were a man, then that man was floundering toward only one possible goal—Death.

Yet the thing might be a maverick whose white bones were destined to shine their eternal warning on the desert sands with those thousands of other bones, brute and human.

Starley hesitated. He jammed the shapeless sombrero lower on his head, half-shut his eyes to soften the deceiving light. It was useless, he knew, to try to save a thirst-toppled maverick; worse than useless, for even after the exhausting, hazardous trip of rescue the animal's life could be prolonged only a few suffering hours. But if that dodging black figure were a human being—

Suddenly the desert man straightened. His black eyes had caught the ornate "V" of a vulture sliding across the dazzling blue of the desert sky, then a second. In at the death, those carrion birds would be.

It was marvelous how the repulsive, gory-topped desert scavengers sensed the approach of death, as if they could hear the very rustling of death's wings, high up in the blue. Miles across the desert they had wheeled, instinctively perhaps, to the exact spot of approaching death.

A vulture, pecking the carcass of a sun-bloated steer is a horrible sight, the bloody top-knot, the scrawny bare neck, the cruel beak, and greedy, glassy eyes. Jerome Starley had witnessed such a horrible feast more than once. And now the thought that the food of these vultures might possibly be a human body drove him into action.

"Come on, Tin Can!" he ordered. "We'll go down. I can't be sure, but we won't take a chance. No, sir. If that is a man he needs some help and needs it quickly. Hee-aw there, Tin Can!"

The little burro, spindly-legged, pot-bellied, ludicrous, raised his silver-tipped nose in the air. It was easy to see how he had gained his name, Tin Can. He looked for all the world as if a shiny bucket had been slipped over his nozzle, and fastened there permanently. Now he twisted that comic, gray-white face to his shoulder, and gazed pathetically at his master.

"Hee-aw! Gid-ap!" Starley thwacked the bone-bulging flank with the flat of his hand; a white dust cloud rose, and hung lazily in the still air.

Tin Can shook himself; the huge pack of provisions and tins on his back rattled noisily. He shook himself again, then daintily, gingerly raised one little hoof, and felt for the edge of the mesa.

Trust the burro to pick his way down that declivity; trust him to select the easiest route through encelia, and white buckthorn, and prickly pear, the surest footing in the loose rubble.

Starley paused to locate definitely that black figure floundering on the desert below against certain bowlders and Joshua trees, then followed his burro as all good desert men follow their pack animals.

Halfway down the steep slope, sight of their objective was lost to man and beast, but steadily they plodded ahead, now slipping, sliding, riding miniature land-slides, now feeling their way cautiously across sheer rock ledges.

The desert floor was reached, and Starley tried vainly to urge his pack animal to greater speed. Their progress southeasterly across that expanse of waste seemed almost imperceptible, minute. A white dust cloud rose from their laboring feet, and hung close overhead.

Man and animal coughed as they sucked the irritating alkali particles into their throats; their heads were down, their bodies slouched loosely, their legs seemed to work alike, mechanically, with flat-footed, loose-jointed strides.

They circled mesquite thickets, dodged the fearful cholla cactus, dropped to the bleached, stony bed of a barranca, and laboriously climbed out again. Their advance, negligible as it seemed against the looming San Bernadino range behind them, was nevertheless steady, unceasing.

Yet it took an hour to reach the spot, a

mile away, where Starley had first seen that grotesque figure squirming and twisting in the sand.

"Almost there, Tin Can," the desert man announced at last. "I marked that sun-burned granite butte there, and the twin Joshuas. Watch for tracks, now, old boy, staggering, uneven tracks, maybe, and —whoa-up! There they are! And a man's, as I live!"

The sand of the desert floor was furrowed unevenly ahead of them; loose particles still rolled occasionally into the deep indentations. "Trouble!" muttered Starley as he strode ahead of the burro and hurried over the broken sand crust. "Look! He fell there. Or dove. Hard to get up, too."

He followed the trail another hundred yards. "Down again. Flat, this time. And crawled. Yes, he crawled here. Bad business! But he covered a lot of ground from the time I first saw him."

The desert man was loping ahead now with great, long-legged strides which left the burro far behind. But still he talked, perhaps as a safety-valve to his excitement.

"Still crawling, but falling on his face oftener and—ah! There he is!" There was a scurry of feet in the sand—vultures gaining speed for their awkward take-off into the air, then the slow flapping of huge wings.

One great leap forward Starley took, and stood over a huddled patch showing black against the white sand. Yes, a man, or the tortured remains of one—a boy, rather, whose hair caught and held the merciless glare of the sun.

His face was raw red, his eyes closed. What had been a mouth was a puffy, bleeding slit; the cheeks were tightly drawn, bone-showing; the hands, too, were scrawny, mere claws. The heat had done that, the sucking sun.

Starley had known big men to lose fifty pounds in a single day's contest with thirst and sun. This boy didn't have much to lose; at best he was probably slender. Now, as Starley took him in his arms and ran with him back to the burro, he seemed almost without weight.

The desert man placed his human burden in the meager shade of the little mousy burro, and jerked a canteen from the pack. Half of the water he poured over the boy's head, then jerked the bandanna from his throat, and soaked it.

Carefully he squeezed the water from the handkerchief drop by drop into the lad's half-open lips. The sufferer stirred slightly; red-shot eyes flickered open, but shut again immediately. Once more Starley wrung water into the boy's mouth.

"Must be careful, Tin Can," he announced, resuming the habitual one-sided conversation with his faithful pack animal. "Not too much at first, you know. And —there! That's plenty."

He emptied the remaining water over the thin, sun-tortured face, and then watched expectantly for those bleary eyes to flicker open again. But the youth remained unconscious, warped limply on the sand.

Jerome Starley rose. He placed his huge hands on his hips, and gazed down pityingly at the huddled black figure.

"Too late," he muttered. "Guess I was too late. Poor kid! Nothing more I can do for you now, except give you water every little while. You're in the hands of—of—" His voice trailed off.

Suddenly he raised his lean, brown face; his piercing black eyes flashed out over the desert; one clenched fist rose, and shook fiercely.

"Damn you, desert!" he muttered. His voice rumbled angrily. "Damn you! Up to your old tricks again! Killing, killing, killing! That's you, you hellish combination of heat, and sand, and poison! Killing the weak! Why don't you try your tricks on me? Heh?"

His voice rose grumblingly; his clenched hand pounded his huge chest. "Why don't you try your tricks on me?" he repeated, daring the desert, sneering at it. "I'm strong! You can't beat me. Oh, you could once! You almost did, more than once. But I know you now, know your tricks.

"Yes, maybe you'll beat me sometime, yet. But not now. I'm too strong for you, damn you! You know it! So you take this kid, this poor weak kid! Stalk-

ing, stalking like a mountain lion, until you get some one, get this boy! Oh, damn you!"

The burro had turned his bony head to watch his master, swinging his tail lazily, and blinking as if he understood. Sight of him broke the anger in Jerome Starley. The desert man grinned into that ludicrous face of Tin Can.

The grin broadened; it slit the desert man's brown face, brought other lines into it below the deep glare-etched furrows around his eyes, and across his forehead. That huge grin changed Starley's face, made it younger, almost boyish. And following the grin came a chuckle, a rumbling chuckle, healthy, infectious.

"At it again, ain't I, Tin Can?" he demanded. "One of my orations. And you know it isn't true. The way I bawl out the desert, I mean, as if I hated her. I don't hate her, do I, Tin Can? Why, she's my sweetheart; she's clean and beautiful and I—I love her. Surest thing you know, Tin Can. Only she's cruel!"

The laughter left his voice; the grin vanished from his face. He stared down at the huddle of humanity on the sand. "She's damned cruel," he said slowly. "Damned cruel! Especially to those who don't know her like I do! Poor kid!"

Suddenly he turned to the burro, and began to loosen the pack straps. "We're camping right here, Tin Can," he announced. "A dry camp, but the best we can do. That kid's only chance is to lie perfectly quiet. Here! This tarpaulin will give him some shade.

"Shade, and water, and the constitution God gave him—those will tell the story."

He busied himself unpacking the burro, arranging his camp. Several times he paused to wring water into the mouth of the unconscious youth, and to fan him diligently with his sombrero. But except for that one early flicker of his eyelids the boy gave no sign of life.

The sun was unmerciful; its torrid rays made the desert a blinding, burning pavement. The afternoon seemed interminable, a seering, agonizing lifetime. Yet Jerome Starley dared not move the boy he had found.

Grimly, silently, he endured the heat while the lines around his eyes deepened, and his face glistened with perspiration. That raw-faced youth on the sand didn't perspire; a bad sign, that, and the desert man shook his head forebodingly.

Suddenly a shadow raced out on the desert from the west. It approached steadily, rapidly, a purple shadow, shading into black at the base of the westward mountains.

One moment Jerome Starley was weltering in the sun's rays; the next, a heavy shade swept over him. With it came a chill in the air, a definite tang of the snow on those jagged peaks to the west.

Momentarily the sun poised on the top of the Sierras, making golden fire of the higher crests, Baldy, San Bernardino, and, farther south, the majestic eminence of old Grayback. Across the desert to the east, the sand and bare hills glowed more blindingly than ever.

Gradually a toothlike peak lit into the burning ball, which had changed from white, through yellow, to red. Then, with startling rapidity, the sun plunged from its rock perch into the valley beyond.

Dusk claimed the desert. With it came coolness, a subtle promise of new life and new hope. Now would come a respite of a few hours from the cruel heat, a few hours of easy breathing, a few hours in which to regain sun-sucked strength.

Too soon heat and white light again would be master of that region of rock and sand, the torturer of those few living things who dared try to endure. Very precious were these hours of reprieve; much must be done in them.

Already coyotes were stirring from their lairs; down from the foothills sounded their cruel bark. Jack rabbits, too, emerged from hiding; soon their white tails would cut through the desert night like half-hidden lights. Antelope "pack" rats, "phoby" skunks, all the small denizens of the desert, moved into action, and began their nightly quest for food.

Jerome Starley, too, stirred from his lethargy. Desert dusk, he knew, was very short, and there was much to do before dark: A camp fire to be built of resinous

creosote bush and tough mesquite roots; a frugal supper to be prepared; blankets to be unrolled, and ground cleared for beds.

The desert-smitten boy, too; every possible care must be given him. He was still lying limply below the tarpaulin which Starley had thrown over a creosote bush.

During that long, withering afternoon, he had given no sign of renewed life, although the desert man had been prodigal with his water supply, bathing the sun-seered face, forcing larger and larger amounts between the puffy lips.

"The night will tell the story," the desert man announced to Tin Can. The burro was watching the preparations for the evening meal, patiently waiting a chance to get his silver nozzle into the flapjack flour, or coffee can.

"Get away, there, you thieving devil! Blast your tough hide, you'd eat a tin can if it had the word 'tomato' printed on it! Get away, I said! Go find yourself some filaree or fox tail. Beat it!"

Starley waved a dripping spoon at the burro, who flicked his tail lazily in answer.

"As I was saying, to-night will give the answer—life, or death. Poor kid! Too young to go out this way. Wonder who he is, how he happened to be out on this pavement of hell without even a canteen."

Tin Can showed little interest in his master's words; his big, hair-screened eyes watched the little pile of flapjacks grow on a pie tin. Starley turned to scour his frying pan in the sand, and the burro saw his chance.

His white nose thrust forward; he seemed to grin as his big teeth closed over the cakes. Whang! The frying pan descended on the burro's bony hips. Stoically, the pack animal moved away, munching his stolen supper.

Starley grinned. That was a daily contest between master and beast, the cunning of the animal against the watchfulness of the man for the possession of the flapjacks. To-day Tin Can had won at least a partial victory, but the desert man took his loss good-naturedly, eating the remainder of the cakes with more relish because of the little by-play.

He topped off the flapjacks with a cup of coffee and a bit of sweet chocolate, then prepared for the night. Once more he bathed the face of the unconscious boy, and forced water between his lips.

A tattered blanket was wrapped gently around the limp figure, which he carried closer to the fire. Then Starley rolled up in his own blanket, rested his head on a roll of extra clothing, and was ready for sleep.

The firelight cut a red glow in the desert darkness. Shadows danced. Overhead, the stars seemed to drop lower and lower, as if suspended from silver tassels. The sharp cry of coyotes sounded from the foothills; occasional scurries in the brittle brush showed that other animals were curious, or hungry, or both.

The air which brought the coyotes' cries down from the hills was uncomfortably cold now. Starley pulled the blanket tighter to his body.

"Wonder who the kid is," he muttered. But he didn't wonder long; sleep comes quickly after a long, exhausting day on the desert. It claimed the desert man almost instantly.

The fire smoldered, died out; darkness reigned. Its black blanket enveloped a sleeping man, an unconscious boy, and a white-faced burro who was nosing around in the hope there might be more food to steal.

Jerome Starley awoke suddenly. There was a weight on his chest, fingers at his throat—clutching, frantic fingers. Momentarily, he was too surprised to move. Then he fought his attacker savagely. His huge body rolled over; his hands pushed at the face he could barely see in the darkness.

Now he was on top, holding his assailant pinned to the sand. Surprised he was, at the ease with which he had turned the tables, the feebleness of the other's defense.

Then he realized that his attacker was the scrawny boy he had saved from the desert's maw. Immediately his huge hands loosened their grip on the youth's throat.

"What's the matter with you?" he demanded angrily. "What's the idea?"

"You shan't take me back," came the answer, shrill, hysterical. "You've caught

me, but you shan't take me back. They'll hang me." The thin body under Starley twisted and squirmed desperately.

"Quiet, my hearty!" rumbled Starley, soothingly. "Ease off! You're out of your head. Wait till I get some water."

He started to leave the boy, but felt the sudden lurch for freedom. The crazed youth would flee into the darkness, and pay for his fear with slow death. "No, you don't!" warned the desert man.

He rose, picked up the clawing figure, and tucked it under his arm as he would a sack of alfalfa. Then he felt his way to the canteens, found them, and laid the boy on the sand again while he poured water over the burning face, and forced it between muttering lips.

The youth choked, gasped, then suddenly relaxed. "You won't let 'em hang me?" he demanded. "You won't let 'em hang me? I killed him, but I had to. Honest, I had to. You won't let 'em hang me?"

"No," Starley answered. "I'll not let them hang you. Now go to sleep! You'll be better in the morning."

The boy sighed deeply. His hand caught the huge paw of the desert man, and clung tightly. "Don't — let — 'em — hang —" The words trailed off into silence; the lad's fevered breathing became slower, more regular.

Cramped, chilled, thoroughly uncomfortable, Jerome Starley sat hunched over the sufferer, unwilling to free himself from that trusting grip. Once in the long hours which followed he spoke.

"If this isn't the damnedest thing!" he muttered. "Holding the hand of a murderer so's he can sleep!"

CHAPTER II.

A FRIEND IN THE DESERT.

"NOW then, spit it out!"

Jerome Starley issued the order soon after dawn. With the first light he had released himself from that desperately clinging hand, and prepared a frugal breakfast of coffee and sour-dough biscuit.

The boy had awakened soon after, in time to eat a little food, all that Starley would allow him. Sullen, the lad was, distrustful! His blood-shot eyes studied the figure of the desert man. Once he essayed conversation.

"You're the biggest man I ever saw," he said. "The tallest, anyway, and the broadest at the shoulders." Starley had merely grunted; he wasn't ready to talk yet, and he didn't want the boy to get the idea that he could dodge the issue by making conversation.

Now that the breakfast dishes were sand-scoured, and put away Starley filled his pipe, and hunched himself in the sand, facing the boy.

For a moment he studied the youth, marked the weak, shifting eyes, the unusual contour of the head, pinched in at the cheek bones, the thin jaw, and receding chin. Not a prepossessing boy, surely, yet obviously more weak than vicious. His inspection completed, Starley repeated his command: "Spit it out!"

"What?" The boy's eyes darted right and left as if searching for a way to escape.

"You know what: the reason you are afraid of me, the reason you were running loco on the desert yesterday, the thing you mentioned last night."

"I was off'n my bean last night, I guess. Talkin' foolishness. I haven't done nothin'."

Jerome Starley leaned forward, and waved his pipe as if knocking aside the words of denial. "Listen," he said, "I've got to know your story so's I can decide what to do with you. You've killed a man. That's plain enough. All right. Now where, and why?"

"I didn't!" The youth clamped his thin jaws stubbornly on the words. It was plain he had no idea of confessing.

Starley sucked thoughtfully at his pipe. He couldn't make the boy speak, not without physical violence, and thought of punishing a fellow who was already weakened by a terrible ordeal was distasteful to the desert man.

He couldn't blame the boy for not confessing, either. Yet he must know the truth in order to plan his next move. Perhaps he could win the lad's confidence, persuade him that here was a man to trust.

"My name's Starley," he announced conversationally. "Jerome Starley. And yours?"

"Joe Budhouser." The words came thoughtlessly. Immediately, the boy's teeth caught his lip; it was plain that he wished the words recalled.

"Well, Joe, I'm not a deputy sheriff, like you thought last night when you tried to strangle me."

"I told you I was off'n my nut last night," the boy muttered.

"Sure, sure, I know," Starley agreed heartily. "Joe, I've been tracking the desert for eight years." He paused thoughtfully. "How old do you think I am, Joe?"

The ineffectual blue eyes surveyed the desert man again. "I can't tell," Budhouser muttered lamely. "Your eyes look as if you had lived forever, an' yet you're young an' strong. Gosh, terrible strong! I never saw such large hands, an' such ridges on any one's arms."

"How old?" insisted Starley.

"Well, mebbe thirty or thirty-five."

The desert man grinned. "As bad as that, eh?" he muttered quietly. "Joe, I'm twenty-four. Oh, I've lived longer than that," he hastened to add. "A year on the desert is like five years most places, and I've been on the desert eight years."

He was silent for a moment, perhaps reviewing those years in his mind. Then: "Ever been in an orphanage, Joe?" he demanded. The boy shook his head.

"Well, I have, Joe, and maybe that helps to make me look older, too. I ran away, Joe, like you're running away. I was sick. Criminy, it seems a long time ago.

"Yet I can see it all again, like it was yesterday, a little room under the slate roof, four other boys trying to sleep while I coughed, the doctor.

"'Tuberculosis.' That's what the doctor said, and then something about getting me away from the other boys. Well, I got away, all right. I was sixteen, and I knew what tuberculosis was. My father and mother had both died of it.

"Yes, I got away, with the clothes on my back, a half loaf of bread, and a tall, thin body that almost split open with coughing. And I knew where I was going, too, Joe, the desert. I got here, too.

"Eight years ago next month I dropped out of a freight car at Barstow, and crawled out on the desert. I think there's a brown spot in the sand over there yet where I had my worst coughing and bleeding spell. But I laid in the sun, Joe, and gradually the sun warmed me.

"It's a terrible sun out here, but I never curse it, not any more, not after what it did for me. Well, two days later, I crawled to a water tank, and then I crawled back out on the desert again.

"Finally a man took me in, a Mexican section boss, Mateo Chico, a good man. When I got strong enough I worked for him —stayed there eight months.

"He had a daughter, too, Angelica, a slender, brown, starry-eyed, beautiful girl. Loving, lovable, and I—but no matter. I knew she wasn't for me. So I got a burro, and a pack, and—well, here I am, a desert rat, a wanderer.

"Sometimes I work in a mine, sometimes I prospect, sometimes ride cattle, or herd sheep. But mostly we're just wandering, Tin Can, there, and I." He pointed his pipe stem at the burro, who was slouching forward toward the food pack, keeping a weather eye on his master.

"That's my story, Joe," the desert man concluded. "You see, I'm not trying to capture you. You can trust me. Now what about you, Joe? You ran away, too?"

The boy looked into the steadfast eyes of Starley. There was something compelling in those black orbs, something timeless, all-understanding, as changeless as the desert. Joe Budhouser choked, and caught his breath. Then he plunged.

"Yep," he said, "I ran away, too. Only I've always been runnin' away, ever since I was nine years old. My mother—well, mebbe she wasn't too good." He averted his eyes at the confession.

"My father, he was scum. So I ran away, gay cat first, then a real hobo. I've seen this rat cage, I'll tell you. Frisco to York and back four times; Mexican border to Montreal.

"Hash houses, handouts, free flops, easy marks—I know 'em all. An' more'n one

jail, too. But no bad trouble, you know, no bad trouble, not till the other night—" He hesitated and stopped.

"Yes?" primed the desert man impersonally.

Again there was that scrutiny of black eyes by weak blue ones; again a moment's hesitation, followed by the decision to speak.

"There's a little place up on the main line. Pokato, it's called. Jus' a red-and-black station, an adobe store hiding a bar, with rooms over it, an' a line of freight car section houses.

"I got off'n my side door Pullman up there. God knows why; I don't. But there was a woman there. She gave me a hand-out, an' made a fuss over me. A fat woman, with black eyes, an' brown skin under the pile of powder on her face, not much to look at, she wasn't, but full of hell.

"She took me in. She lived over the store. We had some liquor, an' a party. Right in the middle of it a big, yellow-faced feller blew in.

"He had black eyes, too, like yours, only they weren't fastened in his head. They swam, kinda, as if they were loose. Black hair all over his face, an' head, an' bare chest, excep' below one eye, where there was a red scar."

"That 'd be Blackie Vari," Starley asserted. "And the woman was his woman, Kettle Kate. Go on."

"This black bloke was goin' to pop me off, with his hairy hands. The woman seen what he was up to, an' tried to hold him back, but he smashed her face an' comes after me."

The boy's voice was shrill with excitement now. He was living through the drunken fight again. "He had me, his hands on my throat, an' twistin' my head. My hands were pushin' at him, an' they found the gun at his belt. I pulled it out, an'—right in his midriff I pushed it.

"Then I pulled the trigger. It didn't make much of a noise. Jus' a little noise, but the man let go my throat! His black eyes were kinda surprised, an' sick, an' he began to gurgle, gurgle funny in his throat.

"Then he went down, easylike, in a heap on the floor. 'Fore I knew what happened he was down. Then the woman comes after me, clawin', shriekin' how I'd killed her man.

"I ran out on the desert. All night I ran, an' most of the next day, till you found me. An' all the time I ran I could see those hairy hands pawin' the air, an' those swimmin' eyes lookin' surprised.

"An' I could hear the gurgle, an' see other men chasin' me, an' a rope hangin' from a tree, an'—" The youth's voice quavered hysterically; plainly he was at the breaking point.

"That's enough, old-timer," counseled Jerome Starley. "Quiet down now, and go to sleep. You've had enough. You'll feel better by night. We won't try to move to-day."

He reached out, and laid a great brown paw on the boy's shaking shoulder. "Ease away, Joe! You're exhausted yet. Sleep!" His black eyes seemed to infold the lad, mesmerize him gradually into calmness, and then into sleep.

Momentarily the desert man sat staring down at Joe Budhouser's pinched face, now relaxed in slumber. "I've seen murderers before," he mused. "Slept with murderers, fought with them. But never did I see such a second-rate murderer as this one. Over a fat half-breed, too, Kettle Kate!"

A flash of contempt, aversion, went across his red-brown face; he raised his shaggy head, and stared unseeing across the desert waste. His black eyes were contemplative, judicial. Then he shrugged his huge shoulders. "Well, I promised to protect him, and protect him I will," he decided.

The first step toward protection was to rig a shelter to shade Joe Budhouser from the ever-increasing fierceness of the sun's rays. That accomplished, the old tarpaulin supported by twisted roots of mesquite, Starley placed a small canteen of water beside the sleeping boy. Then he strode to his burro, who stood, tail swinging, half asleep in the sun.

"Come on, Tin Can! You and I've got to track eight miles back to Willow Seep for water. It's a hard day's job, and the sooner we get started the better."

A moment later man and burro were

slouching westward toward the mountains. Their strides were similar, loose-jointed, untiring. Over their heads a white cloud of alkali dust gathered, whiter, even, than the calcium glare of the sun.

Man and beast coughed, choked, licked their bitter lips, but plunged steadily ahead. As usual, Jerome Starley began to talk intermittently to his burro.

"Funny place, the desert, Tin Can," he soliloquized. "I don't know anywhere else that a man would traipse sixteen miles through sunburned hell to get water for a puny, loafing, worthless murderer."

CHAPTER III.

BLACKIE'S GANG.

WHEN Jerome Starley reached his camp again Joe Budhouser was waiting anxiously for him. The day had passed. Already the purple-black shadows of the western mountains had swept over the tented tarpaulin, on across the desert to the base of the distant Slate Range, whose rocks glowed a vivid pink in the last rays of the setting sun.

"Hello," greeted Starley. "Feeling better?" He was white with dust; perspiration had streaked its way through the mask over his face; the "squint furrows" around his eyes and across his forehead had deepened. Yet, he seemed untired, ready to travel another twenty miles if necessary.

Tin Can, on the other hand, shambled woodenly; his big eyes turned pathetically toward the food pack, his comic head drooped to his knees.

"Fine," answered Budhouser. "But I thought you were never comin' back."

"Almost didn't," agreed the desert man cheerfully. "Tin Can made a pig of himself when he reached water. It gave him the colly-wobbles. He laid down, and I had to lift him to his feet. Fact is, I had to carry him in my arms out of the barranca at Willow Seep. Plain water-logged, he was. Had anything to eat?"

"I didn't know how—"

"I haven't eaten either. Hop to it, buddy, and get wood for a camp fire. Flapjacks and coffee won't go bad, eh? And keep your eye peeled on that ornery burro. He'll steal us blind if he gets the chance."

Both men ate their suppers with relish, and tossed the remains to the expectant Tin Can. Then Starley pulled out his pipe.

"Always smoke after breakfast, and after supper," he explained. "Say, during the day a pipe doesn't taste like anything. Too hot and dusty, I guess. But at night—" He puffed deeply in contentment.

"Any extra tobacco?" asked Budhouser eagerly. "I need a cigarette awful bad."

"Then you are well," Starley asserted. "That's the final proof. When a man is ready for a smoke again he's on his feet. We'll be moving to-morrow."

"Where?"

"That's up to you, Joe. Look around you while I talk. Up there," he pointed with his pipe stem, "that's northeast, those blunt mountains are the Slate Range. Beyond them is the Panamints—you can see the peaks. Over them lies Death Valley, which is one place we aren't going, not in June. We aren't contemplating suicide.

"This other way, south, is where the railroad cuts across the desert. There's where you came from. Pokato is maybe twenty-eight or thirty miles due south, and that's one place you want to miss.

"Straight ahead of us lies the desert, cut with mountains here and there, and a lot of dry lakes. Back of us is the main Sierra range. There's a road along the base of the mountains there, running from Mojave up through Owens Valley. A few settlements along the way, too. Not enough to matter, you understand, but plenty of water.

"Right here we're eight miles from the nearest water, Willow Seep, and unless we turn back west we'll get farther away every step we take.

"But the whole desert is ours, Joe. We can move any way we want to. I reckon, though, you're anxious to get back to the railroad and people and civilization?"

Budhouser hesitated. "The desert darned near killed me that day an' night I was runnin' away," he said. "Hot diggity dog! I had a belly full of it then. But now I kinda like it. An' I guess I'm safer from—from the rope out here, too."

The desert man waved his pipe noncom-

mittally. "You aren't ever safe on the desert, boy," he said. "There's thirst and poison water and sandstorms always trailing you. The desert lies in wait with its great size, and its cruelity, ready to pounce.

"And there're men, too, who aren't any too safe. You aren't the only murderer on the desert, Joe. There're others hiding out here, and claim jumpers, and cache thieves. Then there're a lot of lazy loafers like myself, desert rats, prospecting, wandering, working when they have to. Lazy, did I say? Not so lazy, because it's work just to keep alive day after day out here.

"And not so many of them, either, like I said, or maybe it doesn't seem like many, because the desert is so big. Anyway, you will go days and days without seeing a soul. And those days, Joe, I guess those are the best days."

He was silent for a moment, watching the first stars defy the deepening blue of the sky. Then, "Which way will it be, Joe?" he demanded brusquely. "South to the railroad, or the long trail ahead?"

"I'll go wit' you," the boy decided, "if you got enough grub."

"Guess that's a wise answer, buddy. The weather south of here might be blowy. You see, that Blackie Vari had a gang, and that gang's watching for you right now. Not a ladylike crew, either. I had a tussle with them over a gold claim near Rhyolite four or five years ago.

"Seven in the gang then—Blackie, Pete and Squint, all brothers, and four sons whose names I forget. One of the boys—anyway I had to break him in two." Starley made a motion with his huge hands, like wringing a cloth.

"Look!" He peeled the flannel shirt back from his shoulder. Great ridges of muscle showed, and deep in them a livid scar. "From behind, the boy shot. Nervous, I guess, because he got me there, and in my leg. That's all.

"Then I had to get him before he did any more harm. Since then I've been dodging the Vari gang on dark nights, and they've been dodging me on bright days. Say, you sure Blackie's dead?"

Joe Budhouser grimaced. "Sure?" he said. "Too damn sure. I held the gun to him like this"—he passed his hand midway up his thorax—"an' pulled the trigger. He jus' slumped down." The boy's little blue eyes shut as if to keep out the sight.

"Six-shooter?"

"Yes, I think so."

"That 'd do it," agreed the desert man. "Too bad. I always thought Blackie and I were to have another tussle or two. Well, his gang will be out looking for you, and Heaven help you if they find you."

He leaned forward and knocked the ashes out of his pipe on the hobnails of his heel. "Well, good night, Joe. Wrap the blanket tight around you; the air's coming down from the mountains quite chilly. Get a good sleep.

"To-morrow we're hitting the long, hot trail around the Slate Range to Panamint Valley. That trail 'll either make you or break you, Joe." He was silent for a moment, then added sleepily: "We'll have to stop at the store in Quartz City for more chuck on the way. Good night, Joe."

"Good night."

The answer came very respectfully out of the darkness. Little Joe Budhouser was thinking deeply about the huge, bronze desert man who had befriended him without cause.

Joe's small soul didn't have room in it for real gratitude, but something similar stirred him. Gradually he wormed his way across the sand until he was very close to Jerome Starley's big body. There he slept.

CHAPTER IV.

DOWN.

QUARTZ CITY was a desperate place. From high up on the mountainside it peered out over Panamint Valley and the desert. Isolated by miles of withering sand and sage, it felt its independence and asserted it. Reckless, brutal, immune to the softer influences of civilization, the little mining town knew only one law—that of the gun or fist.

There was a single main street cut into the crumbling granite of the mountain. At one end strutted the giant quartz crusher which gave the settlement its only excuse

for existence; at the other end was the Quartz City Ritz, a combination saloon, boarding house, and pool room, ready to welcome all strangers at its front door, and pitch them out the back and down the mountainside if occasion arose.

It was a surprisingly large, boxlike structure, three stories high in front, four in back, where it hung over the mountainside. From its back windows the drop was a sheer six hundred feet to the desert floor. Thirty rooms had the Ritz, and rarely were more than six or eight occupied. Its chief source of revenue was the bar, which occupied the entire front half of the first floor.

The liquor served at the Ritz was of very doubtful quality, yellow-white moonshine, occasional sour wine from the huge vineyards over the mountains, and synthetic gin. But as long as there was plenty of liquor the miners and hangers-on didn't seem to mind the quality.

And there always was sufficient liquor; sheriffs or prohibition officials didn't find pleasure in traveling scores of withering miles across the desert to close a tough saloon which, as sure as the sun rose, would reopen as soon as a new supply of hard drinks could be obtained.

Between the boxlike quartz crusher and the warped, weathered Ritz sprawled a dozen rude, unpainted dwellings whose exteriors had acquired the burned-granite hue of their environs. Miners' dwellings, most of these, with one large, barnlike "chow house" which served as a dance hall whenever enough, and tough enough, girls could be obtained.

Next to the chow house was the only semipublic building of the settlement, a general store. Its front was once white, but the blowing sand from the desert and the dust from the ore crusher had long since eaten off the paint, leaving only grained boards.

Inside the store was an abundance of canned goods, staple groceries, bolts of cheap cloth, and the few notions and fewer luxuries which Quartz City could afford. All the stock of the store was alike in one way, a thick layer of dust covered it.

The inhabitants of Quartz City were of the breed one would expect to find in such a settlement, brutal, reckless, case-hardened. Many of them were Mexicans, the remainder were Finn miners, with a scattering of derelicts. Over this disreputable crew lorded "Pig" Grabow, owner and proprietor of the Ritz. If there was any law in Quartz City, it was Pig Grabow's law.

Into this mining settlement of hard rock, hard men, and hard liquor came Jerome Starley and Joe Budhouser. Five days behind them was their first camp site on the Mojave, and already the desert man's stock of provisions, intended for one person rather than two, was depleted. He must replenish it, and the Quartz City general store offered the first opportunity.

Up the angling road, cut into the mountainside, past the welcoming sign of the Quartz City Ritz, Tin Can led the way. On one side of him strode Starley, on the other Joe Budhouser. The boy had changed during those five hard days on the desert. The red of his face had shaded into brown, his eyes were clearer, his step surer.

Yet he was still far from prepossessing. Beside the huge bronzed desert man he looked mean, insignificant, weasel-like. His eyes shifted uneasily as he entered the settlement.

This was his first meeting with people since the murder of Blackie Vari, and every passer-by seemed to him a possible arresting officer or a member of the Vari gang. Visions of a tree with a rope dangling under it were ever present in Joe Budhouser's small mind. Obviously he relied on Starley to protect him, and the desert man fully intended to do his best.

Pop Satterwaite, the weazened, withered proprietor of the Quartz City store, knew Starley from former visits. Now he hailed him with the gusto of garrulous hypocrisy.

"How's things, Jerry?"

"Fine."

"Where from, this time?"

Starley waved a hand toward the south. "Around the Slate Range."

"Proved up on that claim in Red Gulch?"

"No. I sold it for five hundred simoleons. The syndicate which bought it is

making a cleaning, too. How's the food supply?"

"Fair enough. Stage just came in last week. Help yourself."

The desert man busied himself selecting packages of flapjack flour, coffee, canned goods, salt, sugar, and flour from the dust covered stock.

"Come from the south, you say?" demanded Satterwaite. "Hear about the murder at Pokato?"

Starley, stretching his tall form to reach a tin of tea on the topmost shelf, didn't turn his head; but Joe Budhouser, who was stocking up heavily on cigarettes, cringed visibly.

"I asked you, did you hear about the murder?" the storekeeper insisted.

"What was it?" asked Starley, placing the tea on the plank counter.

"Blackie Vari. Some young squirt of a hobo shot him. Blackie caught the fellow with Kettle Kate, both half drunk on Blackie's liquor. He went after the guy, aiming to beat him up. But the guy shot him with his own revolver. Blackie croaked in less than three minutes."

Satterwaite related the story with enthusiasm; his rheumy little eyes were watching the nervous twitching of Joe Budhouser's lips.

"Well, I guess Blackie sure had it coming," Starley suggested. "He's popped off more than one man himself."

"Yep, maybe Blackie had it coming," the storekeeper agreed. "But not from a thieving kid who was mixed up with that Kettle Kate. And not close up, either. Say, that kid will give a necktie party if they ever catch him.

"Even the boys over here are all heated up over the raw deal Blackie got. You see, he's been here a lot; he was a great friend of Pig Grabow. Yes, it'd go hard with the murderer if he was caught around here."

Pop Satterwaite turned deliberately, and scrutinized Joe Budhouser. "Who's your pal, Jerry?" he demanded. "Pick him up in the south? Thought you always traveled alone?"

"Getting lonely in my old age," Starley answered, grinning easily. "Well, get out your pencil, pop, and tell me the tax."

A few moments later, Tin Can, looking and feeling more abused than ever under his load of groceries, turned back down the single sprawling street of Quartz City. Of the two men following him, one was deep in thought, the other wide-eyed, fear-smitten.

"Guess we'd better stop at the Ritz," the desert man decided. "Old Satterwaite back there had suspicions that you're the fellow who killed Blackie Vari, and by this time he's spread his ideas all over town. The gang would think we were afraid of something if we didn't stop for awhile. They'd be after us, pronto.

"Come on, Joe! We've got to brazen it out. Keep your nerve up, and your mouth shut. Let me do the talking." He tied Tin Can to the hitching rail in front of the Ritz, and strode into the combined hostelry, saloon, and pool room. Joe Budhouser followed, manifestly so frightened that he could scarcely step.

Silence greeted the entrance of the two desert wanderers into the murky bar room, that strained silence which indicates to newcomers that they have been the immediate subject of conversation.

A dozen loafers were leaning against the forty-foot bar; another dozen lounged negligently at little round-topped tables. A game of faro had just stopped under a corner window, and the dealer was closing his cases.

Pig Grabow, the huge, florid-faced proprietor, was leaning over a slender, black-eyed man who sat in the darkest corner, talking earnestly. He turned his bulging bulk at last, and faced the new arrivals.

"Why, as I live and breathe, it's Jerry Starley!" he called. The note of surprise in his voice didn't ring true. "Welcome to the land of the living, and the haunts of sin, Jerry!" He stepped across the room, extending a puffy hand. There was something catlike in his tread, despite his huge size. "Introduce me to your friend, Jerry."

"Thanks for the welcome, Grabow. This is my pal on this trip. Buddy, meet Pig Grabow, the uncrowned czar of Quartz City."

Grabow's big hand closed over the thin one of Joe Budhouser. "And what do

you call home, Buddy?" he asked, studying the boy's face with yellow, bilious eyes.

"With me and Tin Can," Starley answered for the boy. "How's your poisonous rot-gut, Grabow?"

"Bad as ever," mourned the saloonkeeper. "Have one on the house, Jerry. For the silver claim you almost sold me, eh? You, too, stranger." He waved the two men to the bar, whose keeper had already laid out two whisky tumblers, and was elevating a bottle.

Starley grimaced over his generous drink; it was rank, corroding stuff. But Joe Budhouser gulped his portion down greedily. He needed liquid courage, did Joe, and he needed it badly.

"Now one on me, boys," Starley called genially. "I've got my groceries packed on old Tin Can, and the rest of my coin is yours while it lasts."

The loafers piled with ill-concealed haste to the bar; free drinks were not common in Quartz City, and Jerome Starley was a man with whom they were all proud to drink. The round was downed instantly.

"And now one more," urged Starley, "to get the dust out of our throats."

Starley deemed that second drink a good investment. Indeed, the atmosphere in the Ritz saloon mellowed perceptibly. Only Pig Grabow and the whipcord, black-eyed man at the corner table did not join in the mood of manufactured gayety. "And now another, to wash out to-morrow's dust," invited Starley.

The desert man had no desire for that fourth drink. He felt the moonshine burning down his throat clear to the pit of his stomach, where it seemed hot as molten iron. He noted that the liquor poured for himself and Joe Budhouser came from a different bottle than that offered the other imbibers.

But it was wise not to notice the partiality, not to invite trouble. He knew he could stand up under far more potent moonshine than most men. Yet that last drink bothered him.

Mist clouds began to edge in on his eyes; he could feel his tongue becoming thick and loose at once. Longing for the outdoors was Jerome Starley, longing to be well out of that murky barroom whose shadows seemed to veil danger.

"All right, boys," he called. "One last little drink, and then Buddy and I've got to be on our way. We're aiming to swing over to Emigranto Springs by night."

"Why don't your buddy buy a round?" demanded Pig Grabow, edging forward and seizing Joe Budhouser's arm. "Stranger, who in hell are you, anyway? We're all damned fond of Jerry Starley, but we don't accept no strangers, even if Jerry introduces them. Come on, speak up! What hole did the cat drag you out of?"

"He's my side-kick now, Grabow," interposed Starley. "Isn't that enough?"

"Mebbe, and mebbe not!" Grabow pivoted Budhouser roughly on his heels, jammed him violently against the bar. "Sweet little rat, ain't you?" he demanded, peering into the boy's face.

"Leave me alone," quavered Joe Budhouser.

"'Leave me alone,'" Grabow mimicked. His fat hand went up to the boy's nose, caught it, and tweaked it. "Has mamma's boy got lost to-day among a naughty bunch of rough men?" Plainly Grabow was attempting to provoke a fight, just as plainly little Joe Budhouser was too frightened to keep his head.

"Lay off me," he squeaked. "I ain't botherin' you."

"No, but I'm bothering you!" Pig Grabow imitated the boy's shrill of fright. His hand came up again, and slapped Joe Budhouser's cowardly face.

The sight was too much for Jerome Starley. Perhaps the liquor had loosened his tongue, as it was planned to do; perhaps his head was not as clear as it should have been. But he spoke loudly, angrily.

"Quit that, Grabow! Leave the boy alone!"

"Why should I leave him alone?"

"Because I'm asking you to."

"Poor little sissy, ain't he?" demanded Grabow. "Has to have a guardian to fight his fights for him."

"Don't worry about that," counseled Starley. "He's taken care of himself before, and he'll do it again. He got his man, too, a big brute like you, Grabow."

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Starley regretted them. But it was too late. The little, black-eyed, whipcord of a man to whom Grabow had been talking when Starley entered the bar, now slid forward.

"Thanks, Starley," he said dryly. "That was just the information I was waiting for!" He had an automatic pistol ready in his right hand; with his left he pulled back the edge of his chamois half-jacket, displaying a star.

"Deputy Reade Bunting," he announced. "Looking for this bird here who murdered Blackie Vari! Thought he was the one. Now I know it." His hand went back to his hip pocket, and flashed out again, bearing shiny steel bracelets. "Put 'em into these, boy!" he ordered, extending the handcuffs.

Jerome Starley uttered one rumbling cry. He leaped forward, and caught the deputy around his waist. As if the man were an empty shirt, he whirled him around his head, and threw him into the bulk of Pig Grabow, who was closing in. Two or three of the loafers caught at the desert man's arms, but he threw them aside like poles.

His huge hands struck out, his arms flailed. In front of him he cleared a space, then grabbed Joe Budhouser and thrust him behind his huge figure. One hand jerked open the holster at his belt and shot out with a .45 caliber revolver. Then he waited.

Flight was impossible at the moment; twenty men stood between Starley and the door. At his feet cringed Joe Budhouser; in front of him, ranged in a semi-circle, were the sullen-eyed, watchful men of Quartz City. Deputy Bunting was crawling to his feet, half dazed.

"Listen, men," sounded Starley's voice, "the two of us are going out of here right now. The first one of you who pulls a gun gets plugged; the first one who tries to stop us—"

His words ended suddenly in a crash. Pig Grabow had winked at the barkeeper. That gorilla-like individual had leaned far over the bar, a whisky bottle poised in his hand. With terrific impact it came down on Jerome Starley's head. The bottle shattered into a hundred pieces; it seemed that the desert man's head, too, must break open.

For one second, two, three seconds, Starley wavered back and forth on his feet like a man on stilts who had lost his equilibrium. Then slowly, limply, he sank to the floor, his face and head blood-covered, his eyes still open, but unseeing.

Deputy Bunting spoke first. "That's fine," he said. "Now I'll take the boy!" He advanced, fumbling with his handcuffs again.

"You will not!" announced Pig Grabow. "I'll take care of the rat myself, me and my friends here. Say, Bunting, if you know what's good for you, you'll just vamose for an hour or two.

"You see, Blackie Vari was a particular friend of mine, and of some of these other boys, too. We aim to give his murderer a stretch of rope instead of letting you have him.

"He might get out of paying for Blackie's murder if you take him. As long as we keep him he'll pay, sure. Use your head, Bunting, and vamose. We've made up our minds, and all hell won't stop us."

Joe Budhouser, crouching against the bar, began to whimper in his throat. Like a cornered rat he looked, his little eyes darting right and left in search of a way of escape. Now that Starley was out, he was helpless and knew it.

"Let me go," he sobbed. "Let me go! I had to kill him, I tell you! I had to kill him. Let me go!"

Pig Grabow waved one of his ham-like hands at the cowering boy. "See, Bunting, he ain't even worth arresting. Busy yourself with another drink while we march him out to the old cottonwood."

Bunting hesitated. "Couldn't quite do that," he said. "But I could go down to the store, and be buying some tobacco or something."

He turned toward the door, and sauntered out of it. Behind him piled twenty of the tough loafers of Quartz City, buffeting between them a little, whimpering, rat-like murderer. Already a rope had appeared. The cottonwood tree was only a hundred paces down the crude road.

Ten minutes later a thin black figure waved on a rope's end against the blue desert sky. On the ground twenty men stared grimly upward, satisfied that justice was done.

Back in the Ritz bar a huge bronze man lay unconscious on the floor. An ever-increasing blood pool centered about his shaggy head. Out of the door of Pop Satterwaite's store sauntered the brown little deputy sheriff. He steadfastly looked away from the cottonwood tree, not caring to witness the scene.

Soon the men of Quartz City filed back to the Ritz bar. They needed a drink after the sight they had just seen, and Pig Grabow had promised to set drinks up on the house.

CHAPTER V.

A CALM OATH.

WHEN Jerome Starley regained consciousness he was lying across two tables in the Quartz City Ritz.

"Monk" Day, the bartender, was beside him, mopping up the blood from the floor. As he worked he watched the desert man out of the corners of his bleary eyes.

"Glad you're wakin' up," he announced. "The place is closed for the night, and I was afraid I'd have to leave you here."

Starley tried to answer, but his tongue would not form the words. His head seemed bursting open; he couldn't remember what had happened.

"At that, I bandaged you, Jerry," the gorilla-like Monk went on. "Did a hell of a fine job, if I do say it. Adhesive tape. Yes, sir, drew the cut edges together, and stuck 'em just as well as any M. D. you ever saw."

Still no reply came from the desert man; his black eyes blinked rapidly.

"Hard to get your senses back, ain't it, Jerry?" demanded the barkeeper. "Say, I was damned sorry to have to crack you that way. But there'd been some shootin' and fightin' if I hadn't. Ain't it so?"

Starley nodded. He began to recall the scene of that afternoon in the Ritz bar; his hands rose to his aching head.

"You betcha, I was sorry to have to do it," continued the barkeeper. "The boys all wanted me to tell you they was sorry, too. They like you, Jerry; you're a square-shooter, and they know it. But they had to get that little rat with you—"

"Did they—did they hang him?"

"Surest thing you know," answered the barkeeper, cheerfully. "Say, Jerry, you won't go feelin' bad about that, will you? That kid didn't run in your class. Not a-tall.

"You could see by his eyes that he was a no-good. Plain no-good. And he 'fessed up that he killed Blackie Vari. Yes, sir. Shot Blackie Vari, with the muzzle of a gun at his stomach, over a half-breed woman. Sure, he should 've hung, eh, Jerry?"

"Maybe."

"Then why you lookin' so melancholy about it?"

"Because you boys didn't kill little Joe Budhouser. I did it. With my damned tongue. I gave him away after I promised to protect him." The desert man pushed himself from the tables. He tottered a step or two, then turned toward the door. Monk Day followed, and laid a hand on his arm.

"Now, see here, Jerry," he said, "don't go feelin' that way about it. You didn't—"

Jerome Starley shook off the hand, and staggered out into the darkness. Tin Can was waiting, half asleep, at the hitching rail. The desert man untied his burro, and then hesitated.

Behind him shone the few lights of Quartz City. One, high in the air above the ore crusher, seemed suspended from the sky. A hundred paces in the other direction loomed a lone cottonwood blotching blackly against the gray desert below.

Toward it Starley turned. The night air braced him, cleared his aching head. He felt the old strength and vigor course through his body, but his head was down, his face morose.

A black figure was swaying limply under the first broad branch of the cottonwood. For a moment Starley stared at it in silence, and then he pulled himself up into the tree. A moment later the body of ill-fated Joe

Budhouser was lowered gently to the ground.

Now Tin Can had a new burden to carry, down the angling road from Quartz City, out on to the desert. A strange funeral procession it was: one little burro piled high with groceries, across which was thrown the body of a boy, and a huge, silent desert man striding alongside.

Across a mile of desert Tin Can bravely bore his burden, up a rise to Star Mesa. There, on the western edge, man and burro stopped, and Tin Can was freed from his load. Even the groceries and packs were removed this time, for Jerry Starley needed his short-handled camp shovel and his prospector's pick.

While the little white-faced burro looked on uncomprehendingly, the desert man worked. Most of the night he dug into the sand and decomposed granite. He labored tirelessly, callously, as if labor were a relief. At dawn the grave was complete, a deep grave, lined with stones.

Now the grave was filled again, and big stones piled on top of it so that coyotes could not unearth the dead. In the early morning sun Jerome Starley labored with his little stone hammer. Deep into a sun-bleached rock he was crudely etching a name, "J. Budhouser."

Soon that task, too, was accomplished, and the rough monument laid on top of the other rocks. Starley gazed at his work. It was a good job, but he seemed to find no satisfaction in it. He hesitated, turned away, then retraced his steps. Once more he slouched toward Tin Can, and once more returned and put his big hand on the rock monument.

"Kind of wish I could say a prayer, Joe," he said slowly. "I think you may need prayers. But I can't, Joe. So good-by and good luck, wherever you go."

Now he turned resolutely away and began the task of repacking Tin Can. Yet his eyes constantly reverted to the crude grave. There was more he wished to say. At last it came:

"Joe, maybe you weren't much good, not my kind of a man. But you couldn't help that. And that's not what's hurting me. What hurts is that I betrayed you.

"After I promised to protect you, Joe, I betrayed you. Liquor and a loose tongue, Joe. If it does any good, I'm telling you now, Joe, that I'll never drink liquor again.

"And I don't talk, either. I keep my mouth shut. Because my mouth killed you."

He made his promise quietly, seriously. Slowly he turned toward the east, where the sun had already risen high and hot. He raised his big chin in the air; the muscles around his jaw tightened. "By God," he said. "I never drink again, and I keep my mouth shut!"

That was Jerome Starley's oath, uttered slowly, calmly, without drama.

A few moments later a man and burro strode westward across Star Mesa. A dust cloud rose from their feet, and hovered overhead. Their strides were loose-jointed, tireless. The only moving things in the vast landscape they were, and yet they seemed a part and parcel of that rugged wasteland.

Over the edge of the mesa trudged Tin Can and big Jerome Starley, on down, down, until they no longer showed against the desert horizon.

CHAPTER VI.

SILENT JERRY.

AT the general store in the desert settlement of Liberty there clerked a man called Little Jerry. Up at the Johannesburg mines was a foreman, Sandy Jerry. Working out from Little Lake wandered a prospector named Thin Jerry, and at the Terrapin Rancho worked a fence ride, Calico Jerry.

Now a fifth Jerry became prominent in the desert land, famous from Mono to Barstow, and on around the San Bernardino mountain range, far out on the Colorado Desert. This man was Silent Jerry. Once he had been known as Jerome Starley, but the newer name fitted him better.

He rarely spoke. His mouth seemed sealed, and his pleasantly rumbling voice sounded only when orders or instructions were absolutely necessary. Yet he was neither sullen nor melancholy, and his ha-

bitual silence was a source of wonder to the desert dwellers, to whom conversation is as refreshing as spring water.

Still young, Silent Jerry was, no doubt of that; yet he seemed as ageless as the desert. The passing years had added to his size and strength until his name was a by-word for mighty human power.

V-shaped he was, broad at the shoulders, and tapering muscularly to narrow hips, and straight legs. His hands and forearms were fascinatingly large, corded and sinewy. Nearly always his face was calm, somber, deeply etched by the desert glare and desert sun. Yet when he smiled his face lighted like a boy's, and his black eyes danced merrily.

Legends grew up around Silent Jerry, as legends will grow around all silent, mysterious men. The tales of him were epic and legion; some were true, others undoubtedly false. He was a source of conversation and wonder on the desert, where conversation is really appreciated, and there is plenty of time to wonder.

Of his origin many guessed; no one knew. He was a professional strong man, said one rumor, a Houdini who had killed three people, or four or five, in a single fit of anger, and then fled to the desert.

Another tale labeled him the last chief of an Indian tribe who knew where millions of gold lay hidden in the desert fastnesses. This story paid no heed to Silent Jerry's personal appearance, which was far from that of an Indian; but explained satisfactorily his desert lore and craftsmanship, which seemed almost instinctive, and his constant supply of gold.

However contradictory were the reports of his origin, the desert dwellers agreed on certain things which Silent Jerry had done. A score of witnesses had seen him tuck a well grown burro under each arm, and walk easily with them into the old wooden hotel at Independence.

Others had watched him bend silver dollars over his sinewy fingers like so many pieces of cardboard. A touring party arrived at Bishop one day, and, wide-eyed, told of having been stalled deep in the sand when a huge, bronzed man and a little white-faced burro appeared from the brush. The man had planted his feet in the sand, put his hands under the big automobile, and lifted the front end as if it were a toy, while his feet kicked stones under the tires. He had repeated the operation at the back end, smiled and waved his hand, then disappeared in the brush again.

These were tales of Silent Jerry's strength. But there were other stories, too, oft repeated stories, for the simple desert dwellers were in a fair way to make a hero of Silent Jerry.

Hadn't he carried an Indian, smitten with smallpox, nine miles on his back from Cactus Wells to Independence? Hadn't he repaired the bridge at Swiftwater after the cloudburst, doing the work of three men in a single day?

Hadn't he traveled forty miles on the desert between sunup and sundown to place a warning sign on the spring at Salt Seep after the two Wilsons, father and son, had been fatally poisoned there?

Mild feats and tragic feats were reported. An apricot grower at Ten Oaks, in the mountains, was in dire trouble. His place was mortgaged, as such places usually are, but his trees were coming to the fruit-bearing stage, and the outlook was promising.

Suddenly a plague of ground squirrels infested his orchard. Tree after tree was girdled, branches eaten off, buds nipped. In vain the orchardist tried to fight the pests. They seemed innumerable, always increasing.

Then Silent Jerry appeared. For two weeks he worked late into the night making traps of his own design. During the daylight hours he sat silently among the trees, picking off the rodents with his automatic as rapidly as they appeared.

His aim was remarkable, but his patience was more than remarkable. One morning before the fruit grower could express his gratitude Silent Jerry disappeared. The ground squirrels had been eliminated.

For months unsavory rumors had spread over the desert, suggesting a despicable situation in Stubby Pete's place over at the mouth of Jaw Bone Cañon. Pete had taken an Indian woman to wife, but that need not be mentioned in polite society.

Still, when word got out that Pete had

fastened a ball and chain to the woman's leg, and was slowly beating her to death, it was time some one noticed the fact. Silent Jerry was the man. He appeared one evening at the Coahuilla reservation with the suffering eyed, emaciated woman on his back.

Without a word he left her there, but observers declared there was blood on his hands, while from Mohave came the news that Stubby Pete had fled through that settlement, and over the Tehachipi Pass as if the devil himself were chasing him.

After that Silent Jerry worked for six months on the homestead of Widow Carnegie, whose husband was killed in the landslide at Silver Cañon. From there he went eastward on the desert, to where, rumor stated, he had a secret gold pocket.

When he reappeared he was heavy with nuggets, and had in tow a dapper Mexican boy, who had fled after betraying old Guadalope Arega's daughter. The boy was suddenly quite ready to marry little Anna, it developed, and Silent Jerry was the best man.

Small wonder that the people of the desert spoke almost worshipingly of Silent Jerry, that he had friends from Mono to El Centro. Yes, almost every one was his friend; yet no one person felt that he really knew the big, silent man.

He was admired and loved for what he did. That was a strange thing, too; for it is human nature to hate the man who is always right. But Silent Jerry was modest, unassuming; he took on to himself neither the rôle of a judge, nor that of the savior of mankind.

Obvious wrongs he attempted in his silent way to right, but of his accomplishments he never spoke. Nor did he crave sympathy or favors. When "Gold Tooth" Nugent tried to knife him in the back one night at Little Lake, and Silent Jerry broke the big gambler in two with his hands, he offered himself for arrest.

The formality was unnecessary. The whole tribe of desert dwellers would have risen *en masse* had Silent Jerry been detained a single day.

Yes, a tremendous figure Silent Jerry became on the desert, the human epitome of that huge, rugged land. Men's sorrows he knew, and women's, for humans are only too anxious to pour into sympathetic ears their tales of trials and disappointments, especially when they know that those tales will never be repeated.

Physical suffering he knew, as he wandered the desert with his little white-faced burro. Perhaps, too, there were moments of elation. When an eagle slid majestically across the desert sky, perhaps his heart soared, too.

When the desert floor bloomed for a brief moment after a rare spring rain and became a gorgeous carpet of verbenas, asters, and lupins, perhaps he loved his cruel mistress the more.

Sorrows, suffering, elation, the lone, silent wanderer knew, and undoubtedly moments of quiet happiness. But never did he feel the love of a woman, or touch of a child's hand.

Huge, brown, a mountain of a man, he strode his lonely way through rock and sand and cactus, through ephemeral mining towns and horizon-bounded ranchos, over the mountains and down the valleys of life—Silent Jerry, silent since that oath over Joe Budhouser's grave on Star Mesa, always silent until hell broke loose once more in Quartz City.

CHAPTER VII.

BACK TO QUARTZ CITY.

"TUNGSTEN at Quartz City!" The message swept out over the desert, leaped the mountain ranges, charged through the civilized valleys beyond. "Tungsten! Tungsten found in Quartz City!" It seemed that the very air was surcharged with the words.

Hot-blooded men heard the news, and dropped whatever tools were in their hands. A new rainbow loomed across the desert sky, a rainbow at whose foot was more than gold. Tungsten, the ore scheelite in veins with quartz, the words spelled fabulous wealth.

"Get a Tungsten claim, and become rich overnight!" Those were the words, that was the dream, which lured all men who

had the blood of gamblers coursing feverishly through their veins. Iron filings, and a magnet, men were the filings, and Quartz City the irresistible magnet.

They came. From store and farm, factory and ranch, the rush started. Over Cajon Pass and the Tehachipi raced the dwellers of civilization; from all points on the desert came the prospectors, men who had long followed the olden lure, the golden lure. New hope lighted their sun-etched faces; their inflamed eyes saw success at last.

Quartz City became the Mecca of all such hot-blooded gamblers. That hard little mining settlement had leaped to fame overnight. For years its inhabitants had dug, antlike, into the mountain wall, lugging black-streaked quartz from the artificial caverns to dump into the maw of the huge crusher; long and hard they had labored for scarcely-remunerative gold.

And now, by accident, came the discovery that the whole settlement and the mountains around were rich with scheelite. The greedy men of Quartz City, led by Pig Grabow, tried to keep the wonderful news from the world, but word leaked out.

The desert air seemed to spread the message with the rapidity of a sandstorm. The human stampede began. "Tungsten at Quartz City! Easy fortune at Quartz City!"

Silent Jerry heard the news over his camp fire at Salal Wells. A Piute buck left the message in payment for a free supper. "Men all gone crazee," the Piute said. "All run to Quartz City. All grow rich."

"Gold?" asked Silent Jerry. At first he wasn't particularly interested. Quartz City held only black recollections for him.

"No, not gold. Richer than gold."

That was all the information the Indian could give. Soon he smiled silently and disappeared in the brush, to trail his way through the darkness to the borax works in Death Valley.

Long after his Piute guest departed, Silent Jerry sat staring into the flickering embers of his fire. He was deep in thought. The stampede for Quartz City meant wealth for a few, bitter disappointment for many; it meant desperate struggles between man and man, between man and nature; it meant the reign of lawlessness; brutality, thievery and murder.

In short, it meant a bedlam of greed-crazed, hot-blooded humans, reverting to the primitive. And over them all, of course, would reign Pig Grabow, until, perhaps, some well-aimed bullet ended his career.

Silent Jerry sighed. Thought of Pig Grabow stirred somber recollections. He hated thought of Quartz City; he had no need of sudden wealth.

Yet he knew he must take the trail for the desperate little mining town. People of all classes were gathering there; he might be useful to some of them. Yes, he must turn back to the tough little mining town.

"Tungsten at Quartz City!"

The message reached old Mateo Chico in his two-roomed adobe house near Barstow. Mateo was old now; no longer was he a section foreman for the Sante Fe. His hair was white, but he was still a strong man, almost as strong as when Jerome Starley had worked for him, years before.

Yes, surely strong enough to gain a claim in Quartz City, strong enough to hold it, and become so rich that he could turn southward, and spend his remaining years amid luxury and ease in Mexico City.

"Come, Angelica," he called. "Get the four burros ready for a trip to Quartz City."

Angelica frowned her disapproval; her cameolike oval face expressed an obstinate refusal. Accustomed to being consulted, was Angelica, accustomed to being obeyed. Her beauty gave her that prerogative. Indeed, she was queenly.

If her father had aged, she seemed to have become younger and more beautiful. Slender, flashing-eyed, impetuous, she reigned over all the neighboring young men of her race.

Highly desired was Angelica Chico, loved and obeyed, and she had no wish to leave her kingdom while she was at the height of her power.

"Angelica! Do as I say!" Old Mateo's blood was heated by thoughts of riches, and he would brook no delay. But his daughter

shook her head defiantly. Her little chin was up in the air, her hands were placed firmly on her slender hips, her lips, usually smiling, were set in an obstinate line over her white teeth.

Old Mateo stared at the girl uneasily. Even now he was proud of her, although it was evident that she had no intention of obeying the paternal commands. Her will was stronger than his, and he knew it. Suddenly a flash of cunning swept through his eyes.

"Angelica," he said softly, "it may be that Jerome Starley is at Quartz City. Silent Jerry." He saw a light leap across the girl's smooth face, pause in her sloe black eyes and momentarily soften them. "I know that Jerry is there," wise old Mateo insisted. "Joey Rivers told me he saw him not far from there less than one month ago."

"Jerry Starley!" Angelica repeated. "And what is Jerry Starley to me? But twice in six years have I seen him."

"But eleven years ago when he lived with us for eight months—"

"Eleven years ago Jerome Starley was a boy, a thin, white-faced boy, and I was a silly little girl. Now he is a man, a big, brown, silent man, and I am a woman. We have both changed, Papa Mateo."

"Ah," sighed the old Mexican, and a moment later: "Ah, but you yet love him, my Angelica. Mother of God, why else have you waited these years, refusing to marry little Joey Rivers, and Sebastian Guerrero, and Tack Vari, and Walter Smith, the rancher's son. Have I not eyes in this old head, Angelica, and a mind?"

"Bah!" The girl tossed her head, and the mass of black hair shone in the sun with dazzling sheen. "Bah!"

But that afternoon Mateo Chico and his daughter Angelica started northward with their four burros, toward Quartz City.

"We've struck it big at Quartz City. Come!"

That was the message brought to Squint Vari, directly from Pig Grabow. Squint was the leader of the Vari gang now, since Blackie Vari's murder. But his crew was diminished: only four remained.

Jerry Starley had finished one years before in a claim-jumpers' fight near Rhyolite; little Joe Budhouser had claimed the second in that drunken fight over Kettle Kate; a third, Sam, one of Blackie's sons, had conceived the idea that he could hold up the California Limited single-handed, and was paying for his mistaken judgment behind the walls of the Federal prison on McNeal's Island.

Now of the Vari gang there remained only Squint, ugly, hairy, casty-eyed, but a resourceful, unscrupulous leader, his squatty brother, Pete, and the latter's two sons, Mooney, and Tack.

These were quickly gathered at Pokato. Kettle Kate joined them. She explained that Pig Grabow had sent for her specifically, and asked her to spread word among a certain class of girls she knew, telling them they were wanted at Quartz City. This she had done, and now was ready to proceed.

The four men and the half-breed woman —an ill-favored party, surely—turned northward toward Quartz City, bearing slightly to the east after they rounded the Black Rock Hills. Sure of themselves, they were, and sure of the welcome which Pig Grabow would give them, as valuable reinforcements.

Fifty miles to the west of Pokato another expedition was organizing for the journey across the desert to riches. A party *de luxe*, this was, as any party must be which had Carol G. Winningham for leader.

Winningham had first heard of the Quartz City tungsten strike while waiting in Mohave for a stage to take him over the Tehachipi. He was a Boston mining man who had just returned from a cursory examination of his company's holdings near Johannesburg.

Because he had made the fifty mile journey between Mohave and Johannesburg several times, and lived in that mountain city for a few days, Winningham fancied that he knew the ways of the desert, and the ways of desert men.

So sure was he of his ability that when the first feverish news of the tungsten strike swept into the old wooden hotel at

Mohave, Winningham immediately decided to join the rush. His rotund body swelled with excitement; his rubicund face became redder than ever, his little blue eyes danced with eagerness.

"Eloise," he said to his daughter, who acted as his secretary, "Eloise, now's our chance to retrieve the fallen fortune of the ancient house of Winningham. The chance of a lifetime!

"Think of it, girl; millions in mineral wealth lying out there in the desert and mountains; millions waiting for us to claim it. And here we are, right on the ground floor, among the first who know the news.

"Oh, there'll be other prospectors ahead of us, but they'll be picyunish. We'll be able to operate on a grand scale. Where the little fellow makes his hundreds or thousands, we'll make millions! Think of it, Eloise! The chance of a lifetime! We never were so lucky!"

Eloise Winningham wasn't so sure. She was a small, golden-haired girl, as modest as her father was pompous. Her great blue eyes were wistful, tired, as if wearied of seeing her father's perpetual enthusiasms fall into failure. Pretty she was, but not a striking beauty.

Very slender and small-featured, her fragile prettiness grew on one rather than claimed immediate homage. Yet she had spirit, and now she asserted it.

"Father," she said, "I think you are perfectly ridiculous to imagine you can beat these desert men at their own game. They know the country like a book; they know how to live out there. They can fight for a thing, and when they get it, fight to keep it."

"Fight!" repeated Winningham, fiercely throwing out his chest. "There's no man alive who's got more fight per square inch than C. G. Winningham!" He saw that his boastful declaration hadn't impressed the girl, and he descended to parley:

"Listen, Eloise, I'm not saying that I can go out there and grab the best claim on the desert. But I do think I can go out there, and, if necessary, buy up a lot of claims from other men, and turn around and sell them to a mining syndicate.

"That's my business, you know, Eloise, appraising mines, and I'll never have another chance like this to pick up such claims at rock bottom prices."

"But you don't know what you're getting into," the girl protested.

"Don't I, though? I know it's rough, and hard, and all that. But you and I have been to Johannesburg more than once, haven't we? And Quartz City can't be very different from that. Both are mining towns, aren't they? We've camped on the desert, too. Come on, Eloise, perk up! 'Nothing risked, nothing gained,' you know."

The argument was unanswerable. Eloise gave in reluctantly. It furnished her rather painful amusement to see her father prepare for the expedition, rushing around with the pomposity of a major-domo.

Six burros he wanted and he must have immediately, two saddle horses for himself and Eloise, and an extra pair for emergencies.

Two compasses, too, he demanded, many canteens, and all the varieties of groceries which the town could furnish. At first he thought it best to pack horses, burros and food on a huge truck, and let that carry them as far as it could go into the sandy waste, but Eloise laughed him out of that notion.

The elaborate little Winningham cavalcade started from Mohave at dawn of the same morning that old Mateo Chico and Angelica departed from Barstow; the same day Squint Vari's gang left for Pokato. Silent Jerry, coming down from the north, had two days' start on both parties, but he moved with less feverish rapidity.

Swept into that great human stampede toward Quartz City, these four little expeditions—the silent desert man, the four gangsters and their woman, the old Mexican and his daughter, and the city-bred Winninghams—altogether formed a typical cross-section of the dream-dazzled mob which was racing toward riches.

A frantic, crazed mob it was, which charged miles over the withering desert, ignoring pain, and thirst, and heat, in a desperate endeavor to be among the first to reach that tough little town on the mountain side, and the dingy metal, more valu-

able than gold, which lay hidden like buried treasure underneath it.

TOWARD the evening of the second day of their journey, when his party was less than twenty miles from Quartz City, C. G. Winningham noticed a dust cloud angling in obliquely from the south.

Four men and a woman were under that dust cloud—the Vari gang. Constantly gaining on the Winningham party they were, and at last they caught them. But they didn't pass; not immediately.

Quietly, systematically, with only a few threats, and a few leering side glances at Eloise Winningham, the Varis appropriated the well-conditioned horses and burros of C. G. Winningham.

Then they hurried ahead, leaving behind them an angry, sputtering tenderfoot, his frightened daughter, and five scrawny, exhausted horses in the place of the animals they had taken.

Eloise Winningham, happy that the Varis had passed on without more serious trouble, proceeded to quiet her angry father. "Never mind, dad, we are almost there, anyhow. And even a fighting man like you couldn't hold off four ruffians like those."

Perhaps there was a glint of mocking laughter deep in her blue eyes; but if there was, her father didn't see it. He was too busy contemplating the fact that he must now spend another night on the desert, a sleepless night of torture, while other men with better mounts were piling ahead of him into Quartz City.

From high on the western edge of Star Mesa, Silent Jerry had seen the merging of the dust clouds which hovered over the Vari gang and C. G. Winningham's cavalcade, then their separation again. Here and there on the desert he could see the other dust clouds and black specks under them, men rushing blindly toward Quartz City. But the sight didn't spur him on; he had other and more important work to do.

Wind-driven sand had almost obliterated the letters "J. Budhouser" from a granite stone resting on other stones at the highest point on Star Mesa. Patiently Silent Jerry set to work with his prospector's hammer and cold chisel to renew the monument. Quartz City could wait. It would be there to-morrow, the next day, and probably the next.

CHAPTER VIII.

PIG GRABOW'S HOLD.

MINERAL riches are not the only sources of riches in a boom town. There are other ways of wealth, and surer ones. A rapid, expert assayist, for instance, can profit greatly, as little Jack Burke, fresh from California Tech, was proving in Quartz City, with his mortars and beakers and acids.

Any purveyor of food, too, can line his pockets, for prices are high and terms cash. Householders can rent sleeping places for exorbitant prices; certain types of girls can wheedle much of the loose money in such a place into their own possession. Even common labor can command its own price.

Most certain of all to grow wealthy is the man who controls the liquor, for he is likely to control the graft also, just as Pig Grabow did in Quartz City. A czar long before the inrush of wealth seekers, Grabow retained his position.

His bar was a constant source of income and influence; his hotel fairly bulged with well paying guests. In addition he levied big tribute on the girls he had invited to Quartz City, collected the profits from the chow house dance hall, which now blazed forth in glory every night and grafted right and left.

Grabow was the official arbitrator of the town. He made decisions in all important disputes, and made them stick by reason of the power behind him. When no money was at stake he made it his rule to be fair, impartial in his verdicts, but a hundred dollars would make him decide that a stolen claim belonged to the claim jumper, or that a night-prowling sneak thief was innocent of any crime.

Difficult it is to understand why any people should let such a man rule them with the autocracy of a sultan and the morals of a Fagin. Perhaps inhabitants

of boom towns expect just such a ruler; perhaps they are too busy in their feverish search for wealth to pay any attention to any conditions beyond their own personal ones.

Whatever the cause, no man questioned the right of Pig Grabow to lay down the law, no man for many days during that first rush into Quartz City raised his voice against the abused power of the proprietor of the Quartz City Ritz.

Grabow fairly expanded with power. His huge, toadlike, bilious-eyed figure seemed everywhere. Checking up on his tolls was Grabow, maintaining his prestige by never allowing any one to doubt it. As Quartz City grew like a mushroom, as hundreds of men—good and bad, rich and poor—piled into it, Grabow realized he needed assistants to support his régime.

He sent for the Vari gang, sure of their strength and power; he elevated Monk Day from his humble position as bartender to chief aid; he appointed each of the original miners of Quartz City on his official staff.

With such a nucleus behind him, his power constantly grew, and as his power grew his respect for right diminished. Short shrift he made of enemies, but he was wise enough to reward his friends richly.

Quartz City, one day a straggling little mountain settlement looking out over the desert from the modesty of a single street and less than a score of dwellings, the next week a buzzing bee hive of a thousand people; one day tough, the next week tougher; one day quiet, deadly, sullen, the next week noisy, blatant, frantically alive—such were the results of the tungsten strike.

Tents occupied every piece of level ground. Scattered hit-or-miss, they were. Rude shacks sprang up, constructed from roughly hewn lumber taken from the mountainside above. A freight-trainlike addition extended southward from the Ritz; beyond it rapidly rose a dozen single-room houses.

These were for the girls over whom Kettle Kate was to govern. Yes, Pig Grabow had seen all the possibilities of profit, and taken advantage of them. Each night now he retired to his own room in the hotel and received the reports of his many lieutenants, a huge spider watching his web.

He was in his second-floor room the night of the day following the arrival of the Vari gang, receiving the report of Monk Day. The ex-bartender was the last to check in, but his report was always the most interesting.

Grabow's puffy figure lounged slouchily in a chair which had once been upholstered with velvet, but which now showed only brown nap. On a table beside him between two tumblers and a whisky bottle rested a Luger automatic, after all an even more reliable assistant than his lieutenants. He had removed his shoes, and his bare toes continually curled on the frayed carpet with nervous energy. Red as his face had always been, it had become redder during these last few days, an unhealthy red shading into purple.

Apoplexy would claim Pig Grabow some day if a bullet didn't get him first. Meanwhile he was enjoying to its fullest the intoxication of absolute power.

"What's the news, Monk?" He turned his yellow-tinged eyes from the tumbler of whisky and contemplated his chief aid. Sometimes he doubted Monk; at times the man seemed to be soft-hearted, ready to take the side of the under dog.

Yet he was useful. All day long he lounged near the bar, maintaining some semblance of order, guarding the faro game—and, most important, picking up information with his quick ears, sizing up newcomers with his experienced eyes, the official secret service of Czar Grabow's autocracy.

"You knew the Varis were here, of course, Squint Pete, and the two boys?" Monk asked. He remained standing, as all good soldiers do when reporting official business to their captains.

"Sure. They're out now, organizing the Vigilantes, getting together the men who have a grievance against me. They promise to run me out of town."

"What?" demanded the ex-barkeeper. Perturbation flashed across his thin, blue-black face, but there seemed a hint of pleasure in his bleary eyes.

Pig Grabow grinned. "Don't be so

dumb, Monk. Can you imagine any better way to take care of the kickers than to have 'em organize under Squint Vari? As soon as Squint finds out who they are we can do as we please with 'em; at least they can't cause us any trouble, because Squint will report in every night."

"Pig, you're a genius," declared Monk Day reluctantly.

Grabow waved a flabby hand with lordly modesty. "It was Squint's idea," he said, "and a damn keen one." He poured out a stiff drink. "And what else is new?"

"Silent Jerry is back."

Pig Grabow jerked up involuntarily. He frowned. "When did he pull in?" he demanded.

"This afternoon. Went on right through the town, and pitched camp up on Devil's Seat, lookin' right down on us."

"As speechless as ever?"

"Worse. No one's got a word out of him. And bigger and browner, too, a regular giant. He came into the bar to-night to look around. Say, he had to duck his head to get in the door.

"I was tryin' to move the bar back so's to have more room in front. A half dozen fellows were tuggin' at one end of it. Up walks Silent Jerry, shoos the men away, and takes aholt of the bar with those big hands. Moved it like it was a—a little bench, too."

Admiration sounded in Monk Day's husky voice. "I thanked him, and offers him a drink. He's always seemed to like me since I cracked his head that time, and then bandaged it for him.

"But he wouldn't drink with me. No, sir. He just smiles, and shakes his shaggy head. For about an hour he sets in the corner, watchin' the crowd, then he ambles out."

Pig Grabow grunted. "Hmph! Wish he hadn't come. If there's one man all these prospectors would follow, even against me, it's Silent Jerry. Well, he's a reasonable fellow, and as long as he keeps that way we'll get along."

"Squint Vari has sworn to get him if he starts anythin'," Monk Day announced. "The two of 'em met to-night and glared at each other. Squint kept quiet at the time, but after Silent Jerry left Squint talked big. It seems that Jerry killed one of Squint's nephews in a fight over near Rhyolite years ago."

"Yep, I know it. And Squint's always sworn to get even. Jerry was mixed up with that Budhouser rat, too. Remember? The one who killed Blackie Vari? Well, all I can say is that Silent Jerry better watch out on dark nights. Who else came to-day?"

"A tenderfoot named Winningham breezed in, a blow-hard. Had his daughter with him, a blond darb."

"Yes, I saw 'em. Fact is, put myself out for 'em. Threw those five Portuguese out of the big back rooms on the third floor next to yours, the ones over the mountainside, and gave 'em to the fat duffer and his girl.

"Squint Vari had a run-in with 'em on the desert day before yesterday, and told me about the girl. She's a peach. I aim to treat her right. Yes, sir, treat her right. For awhile, anyway. Who else?"

"Borderline Bud, swearin' to get a claim, and keep it in spite of you and the devil this time."

"That old codger back again. He'll fall off the road some dark night. Any one else?"

"The usual crew of prospectors we were expectin' along—Burt Karoli, Whitey Otis, Thin Thumble, Ed Treadup, and a dozen more.

"A couple of girls, too, regular hatchet-faces. I turned 'em over to Kettle Kate. Then the usual bunch of loud-talkin', sure-to-get-rich farmhands and clerks.

"Oh, yes, among the Mexican delegation was an old bird named Mateo Chico. The fool brought his daughter, too, and she looks like a regular fire eater."

"A prospect for Kettle Kate to call on, eh?" suggested Pig Grabow. He leered, and wiped his mouth with the hairy blanket of his hand's back. "Any grumbling to-day?"

"A kid named Carruthers got cleaned at faro, and tried to kill himself. Didn't try very serious, though. We chucked him down the cellar, where he's gettin' over it. Then there was some talk about that kite-

shaped claim near the cottonwood. It's right on the road, you see, and a lot of fellows knew that old Dad Jordan had put up his monuments, and held it O. K. for six days. When you awarded the claim to one of your new bartenders the boys kicked a little. They most of 'em know Dad Jordan, and—"

"Dad Jordan be damned! I promised that new barkeep a claim for bringing up six cases of whisky, and he gets the best there is. Dad Jordan can join Squint Vari's gang of Vigilantes, and Squint 'll take care of him."

Monk Day grimaced. Whether it was because the new barkeeper was so richly rewarded or because the unfairness of his boss pricked even his thick hide would be hard to tell.

"That gang of amateur carpenters, led by Dyrk Tunistra, came in for their pay," he hurried on. "I got 'em all drunk, and then threw them out. They won't know to-morrow morning whether they were paid or not."

A grin of satisfaction cut Pig Grabow's fat face. "Monk," he said, "sometimes I think you're a genius yourself. At other times—well, never mind. Have a drink with me!"

"Thanks!"

The liquor gurgled into the two glasses. There was a moment of silence. Then, "Good night," said Monk Day.

"Good night."

The ex-bartender left the room. For a few moments Pig Grabow stared into space, thinking over the day, making plans for the next.

"Don't like Silent Jerry's coming back," he muttered. Then he shrugged his fat, rounding shoulders, leaned over to blow out the lamp, and waddled across to his bed.

On second thought he felt his way to the door, and locked it, then clawed for the Luger on the table. His clumsy hands tipped over the glasses, but at last found the vicious nine-shot automatic.

Before throwing himself across the bed he carefully tested the gun, and placed it under his pillow.

Even czars have their uneasy moments.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

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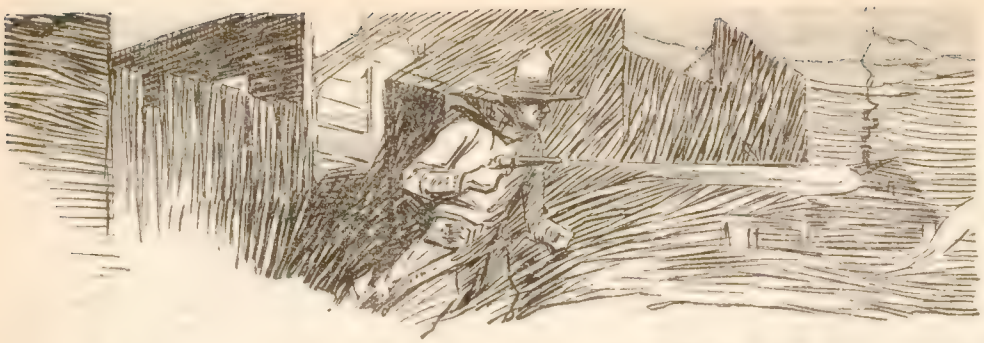
MEMORY

HE can rattle off the names of all the Pharaohs
And the years wherein these rulers threw their stuff;
He is wise to Alexander and his triumphs;
He can tell you all about J. Cæsar's bluff;
He can take you back to Nineveh and Tyre;
He can show you Xerxes and the Persian rout,
But each night he will forget to tend the furnace,
And, when dawn comes, lo, he finds the fire out!

He can tell you of Napoleon and his marshals;
He knows all about the sea fights Nelson won;
He can tramp the roads from Cambridge down to Yorktown
With the worn and ragged hosts of Washington;
He can tell you of the Marne and bloody Flanders,
Where the war dogs caused the stoutest hearts to quail,
But, whenever his dear wife gives him her letters,
He forgets to put the letters in the mail.

Edgar Daniel Kramer.



Excitement Trail

By GEORGE M. JOHNSON

Author of "The Range Rider," "Baffling Trails," etc.

A NOVELETTE—COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

CHAPTER I.

RUSTY MAKES HIMSELF USEFUL.

"AND fifty!" Rusty Towers softly whispered, methodically adding three gold pieces—two twenties and a ten—to the coins he was counting out from his reserve.

"Kinda proud of that hand, ain't you?" sneered Rusty's principal adversary, a man whose expressionless face and meticulous black garb stamped the professional gambler.

"You don't know the half of it, hombre," Rusty coolly informed him. "Your next move."

The room resounded with the tinpanny thumping of a battered piano, harshly accompanied by the scraping feet of dancers. Through open windows came in from outside a confused uproar, occasioned by the presence of a large floating population—Mexican vaqueros, American cow-punchers, and others—attracted into this border town by the fiesta conceived in honor of some obscure saint of the Mexican church, and celebrated by quite unsaintly revels.

Yet all this din served hardly to mask the tension which hovered over the poker table. Although he strove to conceal it, one gathered the vague impression that the professional gentleman's aplomb was in danger of being shattered by this encounter with Rusty Towers.

You would have liked Rusty; no question about that. In his blue eyes sparkled a bubbling fountain of infectious vitality; a sheer joy in the wonderful adventure of being alive; that rollicking, devil-may-care spirit which has ever characterized the cowboy of fact and fiction.

But in the case of Rusty Towers this was not all; there was about his blue eyes a peculiar changeable quality. At times they were like two limpid pools of azure water, mirroring the clear blue of the cloudless Western sky above; friendly eyes, you would have said, and rightly; eyes indicative of a devoted loyalty to be depended on in time of need.

But there were occasions when the color of Rusty's eyes changed subtly to the cold sheen of winter sunlight on the polished blue of a pistol barrel, danger signals it

was well to heed. Many a man rejoiced in the possession of Rusty's friendship; a few had learned to their cost the peril of rousing his enmity.

Some thoughts of this order may have been in the gambler's mind, as his shifty black eyes tried to fathom the face before him. Rusty Towers was either putting up a consummate bluff; or— But the facts hinging on that last were wholly impossible.

"Fifty more!" said the gambler.

Rusty promptly came back with another raise, which the gambler equaled.

"Now I'm going to boost her just once more," Towers said slowly, "an even hundred iron men. And to show they ain't any hard feelings, I'm going to tell you what I got, which mebby you know and mebby you don't—four kings, a right pretty little hand.

"As I figure it, this deal ain't quite gone according to your specifications. Unless I'm wrong a heap, you got a high, straight flush in spades. Now a straight flush usually beats fours, but this here's one time it don't, the reason for that sad fact being that your straight flush contains the king of spades, which sure overcrowds the deck with rulers. Likely your idea was to slip me kings full of jacks, but my discard plumb ruined the layout."

Rusty paused to look fondly at his hand.

"Excuse me for being so talkative," he murmured apologetically. "You got anything to add to my remarks?"

The gambler's body suddenly stiffened, and for a split second he seemed on the point of accepting the challenge. A glance at Rusty deterred him from such rashness. The cowboy sat in a deceptive attitude of limp indifference.

But his pistol sheath—tied down by a thong of rawhide—was around at the front, in position for a lightning-swift draw. The steely glitter of his eyes proved that this relaxation was merely a pose—a trap for the unwary.

To be caught cheating at poker meant gun play; gun play meant survival of the fittest; and Rusty Towers appeared disconcertingly fit.

"I drop," said the gambler suddenly, and his nervous fingers hastily buried an unbeatable hand in the unused portion of the deck. "You've got me beat."

"You said it, hombre," was Rusty's grim comment. "I got you beat a heap. They's more to poker than just cards. And here's where I walk out on you. I'm through! When I indulge in poker it sure makes me restless to find the deck increasing in size. Adios! And thank you for a pleasant evening."

Swiftly he raked in the sizable collection of coins on the table, stowing them away about his person. Thereupon Rusty saun-

tered toward the bar, where he modestly assuaged a not unnatural thirst.

A few minutes later he was on the streets, mingling with the gay, light-hearted crowd that boisterously eddied here and there like a slow-surging current.

Paper streamers and bright colored bits of confetti filled the air. People who thronged the streets of the border town seemed to have gone pleasure mad.

Dark-eyed, dark-haired sirens elbowed one at every turn, but young Mr. Towers heeded not their importunities, or merely answered languishing glances with a wise grin. Rusty knew them for what they were —ruthless birds of prey, despite their gaudy plumage, gathered from far and near as so many vultures to the feast.

A little disgusted with the sordidness of it all, Rusty turned his steps away from the noise and bustle of the main street, keeping ever a wary eye out for an unexpected attack, since the man who wandered alone among the shadows was advertising himself as candidate for a stealthy knife thrust from the shelter of any doorway.

Furthermore Rusty was not blind to the fact that some stray prowler, lured by sight of his winnings at the poker table, might easily have followed, watchful for a chance at profitable murder.

But Rusty Towers, imbued with the spirit of youth and adventure, felt sublimely capable of taking care of himself in any emergency. On he strolled between parallel rows of dark houses which crowded close together upon the narrow street.

Quiet though these surroundings seemed, yet an intangible something assured Rusty that adventure might be lurking around the nearest corner.

The noise and confusion marking the fiesta celebration gradually grew fainter behind him. The street turned sharply to the left, and within a few minutes the cries of the revelers came more clearly to Rusty's ears, evidence that he was again swinging toward the center.

"Worse'n a bad lands trail, these here streets," he muttered.

Dozens of flaring lamps illumined the scene of the fiesta, and as he once more drew near, Rusty found the shadows of the alleyway he traversed giving place to a gloomy sort of twilight.

Suddenly he perceived a few rods ahead two swiftly scurrying figures, one seemingly pursuing the other. Instinctively Rusty quickened his steps.

The slighter figure—the one in advance—darted toward him, but in a second the pursuer was upon it. A scream rang forth—the frantic scream of a woman. Rusty was not deeply impressed.

"Nothing but one of them dance hall lassies," he ruminated. "Likely she grabbed some puncher's roll, and he's after her to get it back. A lot of rough stuff stirring here and hereabouts to-night, but it ain't likely he'll do more'n scare her."

Again the scream pierced the air, an agony of tortured fear behind it.

Then as the woman perceived Rusty approaching through the gray obscurity, she appealed to him:

"Help, señor!"

Rusty Towers was not so lacking in chivalry as his momentary indifference might cause it to appear. Actual violence toward a woman—any woman—whatever the reason that prompted it, was not to be tolerated. Instantly he went into action.

With startling suddenness a window shutter was flung open, letting a stream of light flare forth. It fell across the figure of a young girl, on her knees, face toward him, arms outstretched in appeal. Behind her loomed, indistinctly seen, the menacing shape of a man.

The narrow passage echoed with Rusty's footsteps, at the sound of which the window shutter was closed as abruptly as it opened. Evidently the curiosity of whoever was within had been fully satisfied, or perhaps prudence had overcome curiosity.

A tumult of wild conjectures raced through Rusty's brain as he lunged forward to the rescue. During the ten seconds when the window shutter remained open Rusty had been compelled to revise all his notions of the sordid little drama unfolding before him.

This girl who cried out for help in the darkness—she was no dance hall girl. The glimpse he had of her told Rusty that.

Her face, vividly clear in the lamplight, bore no trace of rouge or other artificial aids to beauty; indeed, such aids seemed not to be needed. Rusty's mind retained the impression of graceful shoulders, of a daintily exquisite figure partially concealed by a lacy mantilla.

The flash of a gun shot burst out as he ran, its deafening report crashing harshly against the dark buildings; a lump of lead plucked viciously at Rusty's sleeve. Even before the flash of the first shot had vanished, Rusty's own gun leaped from its holster, so swiftly that the two reports merged almost into one. A choking cry—the sound of a falling body—testified to the accuracy of his fire.

"Oh, señor!" The girl was clutching at his hand, gasping out the words in a spasm of terror. "Save me, señor!"

"You're darned right I'll save you!" Rusty grunted, peering through the gloom to see if other foes might threaten.

"Queek, señor!" his companion implored. "Take me away. To be found here—eet would be worse than death!"

She spoke a primly precise sort of English, with a trace of Spanish accent and an occasional mispronunciation that made her speech all the more fascinating.

"Of a queekness, señor! See! People come so swiftly."

It was clear that the pistol shots had stirred up interest. The clatter of footbeats could be heard, approaching from the direction of the fiesta.

"We'd best shift, for a fact," Rusty agreed, recognizing how imprudent it would be for them to remain and face responsibility for the killing, justified though it was.

He had already judged his fair comrade to be the daughter of some wealthy hidalgo, and was in full sympathy with her desire to escape the notoriety that would inevitably follow connection with such an episode as this.

"Can you run?" he asked her.

"Indeed, yes. Let us hurry, señor! Please to make haste!"

"Take my hand," Rusty ordered. "Then if you stumble you won't be so liable to fall. Let's go, señorita!"

They went together, and at full speed, the light tap of her heels keeping even pace with the jingle of Rusty's spurs. Gradually they outdistanced pursuit, which evidently had been checked when it came to the body of Rusty's victim.

A few minutes later the cowboy and his companion reached the sharp turn in the street already mentioned.

"We can take it easier now," Rusty suggested, realizing that the girl beside him was gasping for breath. "Then we can slip along in the edge of the crowd."

"You are ver' good to me, señor," the girl murmured, as they emerged into the lighted street at a point removed from the center of the festivities.

"It wasn't anything much," Rusty disclaimed.

He took advantage of the lamps to glance sideways at his companion, gratified to find his conception of her confirmed. She was even more beautiful than he had supposed, was this high-caste daughter of Mexico—her delicate features chiseled unmistakably with the regal mark of Old Castile.

Young in years, she had yet that stamp of maturing womanhood which comes so early to girls of her race. She was dressed in black, from tiny satin slippers to the jeweled comb which glittered in her lustrous hair; even the mantilla was black.

Sole trace of color in the costume was a narrow, tight-fitting bodice, or girdle rather, of crimson, which accentuated the graceful slimness of her waist.

The girl's lips curled in a little smile, half mischievous, half mocking, as she perceived this scrutiny.

"And how do you like me, señor?" she laughed.

Her laughter sounded to Rusty exactly like the musical tinkle of a miniature waterfall he had once encountered in the course of his wanderings, far up on the slopes of the Panamints.

"Do you find me worthy of the efforts of saving from that cowardly attack, señor?" she added.

Rusty chuckled, to cover his embarrassment.

"I'm more than satisfied, señorita," he told her gallantly. "How about you?"

Gravely she surveyed him, Rusty's tanned skin flushing under the inspection; of the two she was the more self-possessed.

"Well?" he at length grinned at her. "Am I up to standard?"

"Yes, amigo mio," she slowly rejoined, her searching gaze never leaving his face. "Your eyes, señor, they tell me that. Blue eyes, to trust. Easy eet ees to see you are the kind of man one can rely upon. What ees your name, please?"

"They hung the handle of Russell on me when I was a kid and not able to object," said he. "But my friends generally call me Rusty."

"Oh, I like that much better myself," she cried. "Rus-tee!" There was a quaintness about the way she said it that Rusty found tremendously appealing. "And you are an American cow-punch', are you not, Señor Rus-tee?"

"You guessed it the very first time," Rusty laughed. All his customary self-assurance had returned. "But ain't it about my turn to run the question mill, señorita? What's *your* name?"

"Rosita," she replied softly.

"Rosita," Rusty repeated. "Little Rose. That's a right pretty name, but not too pretty for the girl."

"I am ver' glad you like eet, Señor Rus-tee."

"And I'm glad you're glad; but I ain't through asking questions. How come a young señorita like you is wandering around loose a night like to-night? I always thought they kept your kind under lock and key."

"I cannot blame that you wonder, Señor Rus-tee. Tell me, did you not ever become—what you call eet—bored, ready almost to go crazee with the sameness of everything? Have you not been afflicted in that way, Señor Rus-tee?"

"Have I?" Rusty cried. "I'm that way most of the time. So I keep hopping along excitement trail, hoping I'll hit something."

"You can understand then how eet ees I feel. To-night—I—I ran away, señor."

"You ran away!" he echoed blankly.

"Of a sureness, señor. Why not? Oh, I don't mean I ran away forever. In awhile must I go back again, and I shall most possibly be a ver' good little girl all the rest of my life. But to-night I saw the streets full of people, and light, and laughter, and I want to be among the lights and laughter, too. You compre'nd, señor? Eet all seemed to me so harmless, this fiesta that ees being celebrated. We do not live here in thees town, but my father, Don Eugenio, he comes on business, and I tease him that he breengs me also."

Rusty nodded.

"I figured you were from somewhere below the line," he said.

"Of course, comes weeth me Tia Maria." Her face wreathed in a grimace of distaste. "Tia Maria ees my duenna, you see, Señor Rus-tee. Without her I cannot so much as budge. She ees old and uglee, thees poor Tia Maria, and she wears a mustache here"—a slim thumb and finger touched her upper lip—"weeth hairs also sprouting from other portions of her face. Poor old Tia Maria! I am ver' sorry for Tia Maria, but what does she know about a young girl's feelings and yearnings, and desires to be alive?

"But just to suppose I say to her: 'Tia Maria, I desire thees evening to stroll among all these people on the streets. I weesh to go'—how did you say eet, Señor Rus-tee—'hopping along excitement trail.' Suppose I tell those theengs to Tia Maria. Oh, dear!"

The girl's shoulders twitched gleefully, and her black eyes fairly snapped in their merriment.

"Oh, dear, Señor Rus-tee! Thees poor Tia Maria would of a sureness fall een a faint, or maybe burst a blood vessel, or other theeng. And worst of all would she tell my father, the Don Eugenio, about how weeked ees hees daughter. One does not enjoy to contemplate *that*, Señor Rus-tee.

"To-night, my father and Don Enrique—" She hesitated a moment; then explained: "Don Enrique ees my father's friend, who comes with us. They go out, my father and Don Enrique, to enjoy thees fiesta, leaving me to spend the evening with Tia Maria. What a prospect! Ees eet not so, señor?"

"I believe you," Rusty grunted sym-

pathetically. "But how did you arrange things to fly the coop and not get caught at it, Señorita Rosita?"

"Oh, but I love that!" she cried, clapping her hands delightedly. "'Fly the coop!' Like a poor little pigeon that desires to try eets wings, eh, Señor Rus-tee?

"But eet was so ver' easy. Tia Maria has after dinner one of her seek headaches. That ees what she calls them. But, oh, I know well those seek headaches. Always they come when Tia Maria has too much wine for dinner. She must go ver' queek into her bed, and there she stays, does thees poor old Tia Maria—how do you call eet—dead to the earth."

"I bet she is," Rusty chuckled encouragingly.

"So," Rosita went on with a demure smile, "when Tia Maria's jaw hangs limp and her eyes have the glassy stare, I know my chance has come. Like a mouse I sleep away. Tia Maria weel not wake till morning, and my father and Don Enrique weel not return till after midnight.

"But on the streets, señor, I so soon find eet ees not as I expect."

All the raillery dropped from the girl's voice; her face grew sober, and she shuddered.

"Oh!" she gasped. "But eet was terrible, señor! Those girls of the streets, with their cruel, hard, painted faces! And the way they look at me. The men, too, Señor Rus-tee!

"Of a suddenness all the joy seenks from my heart, and I become afraid. I lose my weesh to stay among these people who celebrate the fiesta. Queek I try to return to the house where snores that Tia Maria. My elbow ees grabbed by a horrible man who smirks evilly upon me. These other people—what do they care, for ees eet not a fiesta, when one theenks only of pleasure?

"I pull myself away, and fly so queekly down a dark, narrow street. Even the darkness, señor, ees less horrible than the glare of lights. Thees awful man, he comes running after me. I am seek weeth fear, for I cannot escape him.

"But then comes to my help thees brave American cow-punch', thees Señor Rus-tee, like a gallant caballero. So señor," her black-fringed eyes dropped demurely, "I no longer am afraid."

There was something about this beautiful young Mexican that vaguely puzzled Rusty. She talked freely to him with an air of frank comradeship which could not be reconciled with the cloistered life forced by custom and convention on girls of her class.

Save for her dark, rich beauty, her delightful little mannerisms, and the quaintness of her speech, Señorita Rosita might well have been an American girl. A possible explanation occurred to Rusty.

"You've been to school in the States, haven't you, señorita?" he asked.

"Sí, señor—at a convent school in the city of angels—Los Angeles, you call eet. There I learn to speak the English."

Rusty rolled a cigarette, and lighted it, regarding her dreamily through the smoke haze. The hubbub of the fiesta came dimly to them, its harshness softened by distance. They had the world to themselves.

"I like thees, Señor Rus-tee," she smiled at him. "Eet ees pleasant, thus to be weeth a friend, one so brave and strong to protect the weak."

A sudden feeling of guilt oppressed Rusty Towers—a fear of trouble for the girl as a result of her remaining out in his company.

"Perhaps I ought to be taking you home, señorita," he suggested. "If your father, Don Eugenio—"

"Ees eet then that you so queekly tire of me, Señor Rus-tee?" Rosita asked roguishly. "Ah, señor!" Her voice carried a world of sorrowful reproach.

"That wasn't it at all," Rusty stammered, aghast that she had so fatally misunderstood his meaning. "I'd be proud to sit here forever with you, only I—" Rusty broke off; his distress was obvious.

"Ah, but I understand," the girl cried in swift contrition. "Eet ees that I but tease you, amigo mio. You forgive me? I am ver' sorry to hurt you."

"That's all right," Rusty grinned. "Only you did have me guessing for a minute."

Rusty's heart was thumping furiously—strange phenomenon for him—who had al-

ways boasted himself to be case hardened with respect to the fair sex, even the most attractive specimens.

"I can take 'em or leave 'em alone," he had often declared.

But this girl, in whose veins flowed the blood of Castile, was totally different from the many others who had entered Rusty's life in the past—and left it with never a ripple.

"Rusty Towers," he addressed himself in silent soliloquy, "you're sure falling in love, old horse. And I'll say you've picked a winner. She's a queen, this girl—a true thoroughbred."

A devastating thought flashed across his brain—a fear that she might yet be snatched from him.

"How long you going to stay hereabouts?" he inquired.

"For why you weesh to know that, Señor Rus-tee?" she replied naïvely.

"It's plain enough," he countered boldly. "When a chap meets a girl as wonderful as you—one he likes mighty well—he naturally wants to know how much time he's got."

"Oh, I see." In her sparkling eyes danced the elfin gleam of mischief. "Eet depends on my father. I theenk he plans to remain here a week."

"That's better'n nothing," Rusty cogitated aloud. "But I'll have to work fast."

"You are one of these—fast workers, eh, Señor Rus-tee?" she challenged.

"You said it," Rusty chuckled. "I'm considered one of the fastest little workers between here and Las Vegas. You just watch my smoke, señorita."

"But I cannot watch eet longer, tonight, Señor Rus-tee. Now must I go."

Rusty did not try to keep her.

"When will I see you again?" he asked anxiously.

"To-morrow evening once more weel my father and Don Enrique go forth to enjoy the fiesta," she replied. "At ten o'clock weel I meet you here. How weel that do, señor?"

"Fine!" he grinned at her. "But about your aunt or whatever she is?"

"Oh, I weel take care of Tia Maria. At dinner weel I keep full the wine glass, and that ees something she can never resist. She ees to have another of her seek headaches, ees thees poor Tia Maria."

Rosita's eyes danced with their characteristic scintillation. She rose from her chair. "You weel come part way weeth me, señor?"

"Why not all the way?" he insisted.

"But surely you would not weesh to make trouble for me! I am not suppose' to meet friends outside—thees way."

"That's right," Rusty conceded gloomily. "Only I was afraid another pole-cat might bother you—like the first one did."

"I weel go queekly, Señor Rus-tee, after leaving you. Eet weel be quite safe."

"Why not cut out that señor part?" Rusty suggested. "We're friends, aren't we?"

She nodded soberly.

"Then let's get rid of the formality. Sounds a lot more homelike."

"Ver' well, amigo mio," she agreed softly. "Eet shall be as you weesh. Now, please, I must make haste."

Her arm rested lightly in the hollow of Rusty's arm as they left the friendly little alcove which had sheltered them so well. Rosita seemed suddenly quiet, and Rusty wondered what thoughts might be stirring in her mind. After a few minutes she stopped.

"Here must I leave you, amigo mio," she whispered. "Eet ees not much farther."

"Where are you staying?" Rusty demanded.

"That I cannot tell you—yet. Later, perhaps. Adios, amigo mio. Au revoir, Rus-tee. See. I say not good-by, for we shall meet again. Eet ees bad luck when friends say good-by, Rus-tee."

"Adios, Rosita," Rusty muttered huskily. "You won't forget to come—to-morrow night?" His eyes rested hungrily on her.

"I weel not forget. Farewell, Rus-tee," and she was gone like a shadow.

Rusty longed to follow, in order to make certain of her safety, but forced himself to respect the girl's wishes. He remained for a time in the place where Rosita left him, listening, ready to act should her voice cry out for help.

Nothing happened, and finally Rusty went to the lodging house where he had engaged a room.

"Mrs. Rusty Towers," he muttered, grinning to himself at the sound of the words, as he pulled off his boots. "Yes, sir, I've met her, and looks like the halter's tied on me for fair. No more drifting around the range, footloose and free. But good gosh! Anybody'd be tickled pink to settle down with a girl like little Rose to keep him company.

"Dad 'll sure be pleased to get the news. He's always been after me to get married."

Rusty stretched out on his bed, but sleep did not come immediately. Before him he could still see two marvelous black eyes, in turn glowing with soft tenderness, like stars of a warm summer night, or sparkling in a roguish spirit of mischief; in his ears still sounded the entrancing cadences of a girlish voice, and musical laughter, that again and again recalled the tinkle of falling water, high up in the majesty of the Panamints.

The next day was a total loss for Rusty Towers. He wandered restlessly about like a lost soul, thinking only of the coming night—and Rosita. Never before in his life had the hours dragged so slowly. But all things have their end, and that wearisome day was no exception.

Nine thirty found Rusty seated in the little alcove, their trysting place. It occurred to him that Rosita might perhaps be early, and he wished to be on the spot, waiting, when she arrived.

Ten came, but no Rosita.

"Probably had to hang around a little while longer till that dag-goned Aunt Maria of hers went to sleep," he reasoned hopefully.

Relentlessly the minutes passed, while Rusty, a prey to vague fears, consumed innumerable cigarettes.

By eleven these fears had reached the acute stage, for it now began to look quite definitely as if Rosita was not coming.

"Mebby something's happened so she couldn't get away to-night," he mused gloomily. "The hell of it is, there ain't a thing I can do. Why, I don't even know where she's staying."

At last a clock in a church tower somewhere boomed midnight. Rusty was like a caged animal, and though reason told him that further waiting was useless, he still refused to leave the alcove.

It was not until one thirty that he finally departed, a host of disquieting conjectures seething riotously through his brain. Of one thing only was he certain: Rosita had not deliberately played him false.

"She'd kept her promise," he moodily told himself, "if she could. Something stopped her. Gosh, if I knew what it was!"

About then a belated ray of hope came to Rusty, and feeble though it was, he clutched desperately at it.

"Mebby her dad stayed home himself, so Rosita didn't have any chance for a sneak," he reflected. "That being the case, she'll get out when she can, day or night, and strike for the meeting place on the chance that I'll be there. Always assuming she really wants to see me again, and if I sized her up correctly she liked me fairly well. Guess that's my best and only bet. I'll hang around the little hole in the wall like steers about a water hollow in dry weather."

Rusty carried out this plan throughout the day, but results were zero. His hopes were high for the second night, but no slim, graceful little figure materialized magically from the shadows; no voice called softly to him: "Rus-tee! Amigo mio!"

In swiftly mounting panic Rusty realized how little he really knew of Rosita; he was ignorant of where she lived; of her last name, even.

Guarded inquiries among Mexicans of the town brought no information as to the identity of a certain Don Eugenio, who possessed a beautiful daughter. Either they did not know, or they refused to tell; which it was, made little vital difference. Baffled, blocked at every turn, Rusty's desperation knew no bounds.

"Why, I've just got to find her," he muttered unhappily.

The fiesta was over, and the border town settled down to its usual humdrum existence; the influx of visitors had vanished overnight.

At last, unwillingly convinced that Rosita was also gone, Rusty himself drifted aimlessly away.

It was not quite the same Rusty who came a week before. In his blue eyes lurked the shadow of trouble, of a secret sorrow. They no longer bubbled with that infectious spirit of youth and good fellowship.

His mind dwelt in constant longing on that vast region stretching south from the border. A girl named Rosita! What chance of finding her?

Rusty was now inclined to blame Don Eugenio for the ruination of his hopes. Men of Spanish blood were horribly strict with their daughters, he knew.

Don Eugenio might possibly have seen Rosita on the street; some acquaintance might have noticed the girl and told him. He might have returned sooner than she anticipated, and so learned of her adventure; Tia Maria's attack might have been less severe than usual, so that she roused up, thus discovering Rosita's absence.

Any one of a score of explanations might be imagined, with the result of Rosita being sent home secretly, post haste; quite likely that selfsame night.

But explanations did not interest Rusty Towers. The bitter fact remained that an unkind fate had cut him off from Rosita, his loved one—the Rose of Mexico.

CHAPTER II.

THE MASKED RAIDER.

IT was some months after the events attending the Mexican fiesta that Rusty Towers approached what might perhaps be termed his ancestral acres. The name Towers was well known throughout that region. Dan Towers, Rusty's father, had fought a vigorous way up through the vicissitudes of drought, Texas fever, cattle ticks, and rustling forays to a success that ranked him among the richest cattlemen of the whole Southwest.

Uncounted steers by the thousand carried his brand—two crossed arrows—though a score of other brands were registered in his name, once the property of divers cow outfits gradually absorbed during the development of the Towers fortune.

"Old place looks same as ever," Rusty reflected, as he rode up to the ranch. "But deserted, sort of. I wonder where everybody is!"

Rusty turned his pony loose in the corral and hung his saddle on a vacant rack in the stable, still puzzled at seeing so few signs of life and activity. Then he turned toward the house, where his father, a widower of ten or a dozen years standing, ran bachelor's hall.

In the living room of the ranch house he found Dan Towers, seated in his favorite armchair, one foot, roughly bandaged, resting on a box before him. His hair was streaked with gray; his skin had been beaten to a mottled mahogany by the blistering heat of the summer sun during years spent on Southern ranges, and the equally blistering bits of winter blizzards sweeping down out of the northwest. But his eyes were as clear and his hand as steady at threescore as at twenty.

He glanced up from the book he was reading at the jingle of his son's spurs.

"Well, Rusty," was his calm greeting. "Back again, eh?"

"Hello, dad. Yep, I'm back!" and Rusty scaled his sombrero toward a pair of branching steer horns mounted on the wall. He missed one tip by inches.

"Not so good!" he grumbled. "I used to be able to hit that every shot. Out of practice." His eyes for the first time seemed to take in the bandaged foot. "What's up, dad? Horse roll on you?"

"Got messed up with some barbed wire," the ranchman told him. "A week or so ago, it was. Getting on all right, though it come at a damned poor time."

"Meaning by that?" Rusty suggested.

"We had another raid night before last."

"Another!" Rusty exclaimed. "News to me you'd had any!"

"If you'd stick around home now and then instead of drifting over the range God knows where on the trail for excitement," old Dan Towers sputtered testily, "might be you'd know what's doing hereabouts. Plenty excitement right at home; you don't have to trail off looking for it. I wrote

you at Las Vegas that we were having some little trouble with rustlers."

"Didn't get the letter," Rusty explained. "Probably it 'll catch up with me year after next. I'm a sight too speedy for the U. S. mails."

Dan Towers glowered at his son resentfully.

"Ain't it time you settled down like a regular citizen, Rusty? Ain't you chased up enough excitement to last the rest of your life? From reports I get of you, all I've raised is a gun-totin', ridin' fool—a chap no better'n a thousand other range riders. Some day all this plunder I been so busy collecting 'll be yours. Figure you'll be a big enough man to take care of it?"

"Ain't you well enough acquainted with me to know the answer?"

A gleam of pride—and understanding—was in old Dan's eyes as he surveyed the stalwart, lithe figure of his son.

"I ain't got any right to crab at you, Rusty," said he. "You're just the spitting image of me when I was your age—exactly like I was. Me—I was allus riding off on excitement trail, too. Folks put me down as a hopeless drifter—a chap that 'd never amount to a row of eggshells. But I sure fooled 'em.

"That was because I met a gal, Rusty." A note of fond retrospection crept into his voice. "Makes a raft of difference when you meet the gal, son. It pulled me up short, I'm telling you. Knocked all my hell-raising notions to a fare-ye-well. Made me see that riding around, working for this and that outfit, and then blowing my pay at the nearest cow town, wasn't any way to get ahead. A young chap needs to own something more'n a hoss, saddle, and a gun when he gets ambitious to raise him a family. I been counting on the same thing curing you that cured me."

Rusty manufactured a cigarette, puffing at it in contemplative silence.

"Ever think of marrying, Rusty?" his father asked wistfully. "Now that gal of Ed Wallace's is likely looking. She's a healthy, buxom critter; no foolishness about her. Make a hell of a fine wife for a cowman."

"She's all right in her way, likely," Rusty generously conceded, blowing a cloud of smoke toward the ceiling, "but I wouldn't touch her with a ten foot pole."

"Well, then, how 'bout that one over to the Tumbling Y? She's a gay, spritely little thing, though to my notion a trifle too particular with her duds—that is, for a corn-fed beauty."

Rusty yawned.

"You're wasting your breath, dad. They's only one girl in the world I'd marry."

"You found one, Rusty?" old Towers demanded eagerly.

"Yes," said Rusty slowly, and a flash of pain glowed momentarily in his eyes, "I found her—and lost her—all in the same night."

"What's the matter, son? Wouldn't she have you?"

"I guess she would—she seemed to take to me some; only things got mixed up, sort of, and I lost track of her. I don't know where she is now."

"What's her name?"

"That's the trouble. All I know is the first part—Rosita."

"Good guns!" Dan Towers gasped, scandalized. "A greaser gal!"

"Don't say that, dad!" Rusty's voice trembled in his earnestness. "She's no more greaser than I am; high class Mexican, of pure Spanish strain—the sweetest, daintiest thing God ever made. Rosita's not pretty; she's beautiful, and they's a big difference. And all I know about her is her first name and that she lives in Mexico!"

Rusty bowed his head on his hands, the picture of despondency. Dan Towers glared at his son for a moment, but his stern face softened as he grasped the fact that Rusty was really hard hit. When he spoke the old man's voice was gentle:

"Buck up, son! They's always a chance you'll find her. Tell me all about it—if you want to."

So Rusty told the story of his adventure at the fiesta; of his romantic meeting with the beautiful girl from beyond the border. Haltingly he tried to describe to matter-of-fact old Dan Towers how wonderful she seemed in the black gown with its

tight-fitting girdle of flaming crimson; the exotic, queenly grace of her bearing; the alluring quaintness of her speech; the magic sparkle that danced in her dark eyes.

Old Dan shook his head doubtfully.

"She must be right easy to look at, son," said he dryly, "judging from the way you rave."

"If you could only see her once yourself you'd know what I'm trying to say," Rusty insisted. "You'd be proud to have her for a daughter."

"Mebby so, son, mebby so. If you're satisfied, I am. Go ahead and find her."

Rusty turned toward him a face haggard with misery.

"Good Lord, dad!" he exclaimed. "It sounds easy the way you say it. But how the hell am I going to find her? Tell me that, will you? I been working every trail I could think of for four months, and where 'd it get me? Her name's Rosita. Why, all Mexico's loaded plumb to the gills with girls of that name! She called her dad Don Eugenio. That's all I know. A fine, fat chance of finding her!"

"Oh, well," said old Dan philosophically, "you're young yet, Rusty, and I've lived long enough to learn that the world's a mighty small place, one way and another. I expect you'll run across your pretty little señorita yet, and when you bring her home, Rusty, I'll give her the welcome my son's wife deserves. She'll just about own the place. Guess we can afford to do things up brown, Rusty."

"Thanks, dad," said Rusty gratefully.

"One thing more, since we're talking along this line. While you were gone this last time I had some money put in a bank at San Antone—two different accounts, and you're trustee to both of 'em."

"Me—trustee—" Rusty was mystified.

"Sure thing," his father chuckled. "The first is in the name of *Mrs. Russell Towers.* Get that, Rusty?" And old Dan chuckled again. "A hundred thousand dollars on deposit for your wife! And another hundred thousand for the first kid, Rusty—with a fifty thousand bonus if he's a boy and his name Dan, after me."

"Good Lord!" Rusty gasped. "A bit previous, ain't you, dad?"

"Oh, I don't know," said his father meditatively. "Seemed like it was a good time—while I had the cash to spare. Nothing's certain in this business, Rusty, but the fact that sooner or later things are liable to break wrong. I want your family, case you ever have one, to be taken good care of, whatever happens to the Crossed Arrows outfit—and there's a quarter million dollars sewed up tighter'n a new boot—for them, Rusty."

"That's mighty decent of you, dad," the young fellow said, "and I sure hope they'll be a call for it. If I can find Rosita—"

He was quiet for some seconds; then briskly:

"But what's happened to the outfit? I didn't see anybody on deck as I rode in. And what about this raid you mentioned awhile back? We got switched off that track before you finished."

"One answer hits both questions, son. Rustling days ain't past, seems like, and dogies have been drifting out on us pretty regular the past year."

"Moving south across the border, I bet."

"What do you know about it?" Towers, Sr., grunted in surprise.

"Not a damned thing. But old Mexico's the nearest and safest market. Dogies 'll bring five to ten dollars on the hoof down there—and the buyer not fussy over such trifles as gringo brands. A steer's a steer to those birds."

"Keno!" Dan Towers approved. "You've got it, Rusty. But they's one thing a mite unusual about the raids we been receiving off and on. The men are greasers, all right, and they're in charge of a masked leader."

"Wha'd you mean, masked?" Rusty demanded. "Red bandanna with holes punched in to see through, like a stick-up artist along some Wells Fargo route up in the gold diggings?"

"Nothing like that," he was told. "This chap sports a dinky store-made business of black silk over his nose and eyes. The kind they wear at masked balls in high society. Seems like quite a sport, this raider of ours."

"If you got near enough to learn this,

how come he's still alive and in the raiding business?" Rusty pointedly inquired.

"*I* didn't get near to him," was the equally pointed reply. "But we've picked up a little information here, and some more over there, and betwixt and between, after putting everything together, we know what I told you and a little bit more.

"For instance, this masked guy has black hair, but they's a little white splash just above his right temple. Also he has a deep smallpox pit right in the middle of the chin."

"Funny you'd know all this about a masked cattle raider," Rusty murmured, "and let him get off without his hide being punctured a heap by forty-fives."

"Not quite so funny, when you get all the facts. It's more tragedy than fun, Rusty. They hopped us night before last, and Chuck Peters, who was assigned to night riding, ran across the dirty work. He pulled iron on 'em prompt, getting one or two, but a bullet clipped Chuck in the shoulder, which was bad, though it might've been worse.

"However, these polecats saw Chuck shot off his horse, and rode up to where he lay. The fellow with the mask lit a cigarette, and the flare of the match gave Chuck the details of his facial map, as I told you. He asked Chuck a few questions about where animals were grazing, and so on, Chuck being careful to pass out a choice lot of wrong information, like any loyal wrangler. After which the skunk with the mask whips out his gun and sends another bullet into Chuck."

Rusty leaped to his feet with the snarl of a wild animal.

"The dirty hound! He'll die for that!" Chuck Peters, the murdered cowboy, had been his friend.

"That's what the rest of the boys said," Towers, Sr., informed him. "And they've ridden on the trail now, which explains why the place is so dead. You see, poor Chuck lived awhile, long enough to tell us what happened. I wasn't in any shape to ride, account of that barbed wire mix-up, but I sent out the whole outfit, hell for Christmas, a-pouring leather into their cayuses proper. I don't give a damn about losing a few rangy steers now and then, but when one of my riders—a good man like Chuck Peters—gets himself killed defending my animals from rustlers, it's war—bloody war with no quarter asked or given."

"I trail with you on that proposition," Rusty declared fervently. "All I ask is one chance to roll a gun on the man that bumped off Chuck."

"You might've had that chance," said his father, "if you'd been on the ranch forty-eight hours sooner. As things lay, looks to me like you've missed out."

"I ain't so sure," Rusty replied. "Guess I'll head south."

"Alone?"

"Why not? That's the only way to work a proposition of this kind. Those buckaroos of the Crossed Arrows won't bring back the scalp you want, and down in your heart you likely know it. A gang like yours advertises itself same as if a brass band was along, and in a pinch the rustlers can always scatter in the mountains. Besides which these here greasers had a start of—say—"

"Six to eight hours," Dan Towers supplied.

"That's a plenty," his son grunted. "A heap too much, from our viewpoint. Prodding them dogies along at forced draft they're blame near to the border by the time your riders are starting. Your only chance is to jump the outfit before it crosses into Mexico."

"Guess you're right, Rusty," Towers, Sr., conceded.

"Thanks!" was the young man's dry comment.

"What's your scheme?" his father queried.

"I aim to strike into Mexico, gunning for a greaser with a white blotch in his hair and a smallpox dimple in his chin. When we meet I'll tell him howdy with an ounce of lead out of my .45 Colt."

"Hum—and that gal named Rosita?"

"I'm not forgetting her. Don't see any reason why I can't work both propositions at the same time."

"Good luck to you on each count, son. From what I've heard, this mysterious raider is right handy with his shooting iron."

"Yeah?" rejoined Rusty indifferently.

"Don't take any wild chances, son." There was a note of formless fear in old Dan's voice. "I ain't got anybody but you, you know, and I'm a counting on you to jump in and run things for me 'fore long. Besides—that Rosita gal of yours, Rusty—you can't go looking for her after six feet of Mexican adobe's pressing down on your remains."

"Don't worry, dad," said Rusty. "I can handle my end of the proposition, I reckon."

"Empty the shells out of your gun," his father ordered.

Wonderingly Rusty obeyed, while Towers, Sr., did the same, thrusting the unloaded pistol back into its sheath, a move which Rusty imitated.

"Now we'll be talking together," old Dan explained, "and all of a sudden, unexpected like, without any warning at all, I'm going to pull my iron on you. I'll have a head start, see? I want to find out how good you are."

"Let 'er ride, dad!" grinned Rusty.

The conversation between father and son went on as before; in the young man's attitude was the same deceptive indolence he had displayed in that poker game with the dishonest gambler months previous. Old Dan's voice droned along in a monotonous account of various happenings about the ranch.

"Ed Wallace rode in that morning," said he, "and I told him—"

Without a break in the words the hand of old Dan Towers made the characteristic snap toward the pistol butt sagging against his broad thigh. A sardonic grin was on Rusty's face as his own hand flickered like a dancing shadow.

The hammers of two pistols fell with harmless clicks, but the click from Rusty's Colt beat his father's by a full second. Two emotions—chagrin and pride — struggled for mastery on the features of old Dan.

"I'll be dog-goned!" he ejaculated. "You son of a gun!"

Thoughtfully he replaced the cartridges in the cylinder of his gun, returning the weapon to its holster. He sighed.

"Either I'm getting older 'n I thought, Rusty, or they make 'em better now than when I was a gay young blade your age. You'll do, son. You're a sight better 'n I ever was, and folks gave me credit for being a very snappy hand at gun pulling. Guess I don't have to worry none about you. If you ever come to a show-down with that greaser he'll think he's shaking hands with a buzz saw.

He was silent for a moment, then added wistfully:

"Wish I was riding excitement trail once more—with you, Rusty! It's great to be young, just starting out to see what this here thing we call life's really made of. But you got to remember one thing, my boy. A chap can't stay young forever. How soon you riding?"

"Right away. In an hour or so, I reckon."

"Likely it's a long lane you follow. Money 'll come in right handy. How you fixed?"

"I got plenty."

It was characteristic of Rusty Towers that he always financed his own journeys that followed the lure of adventure. Never yet had he sent back an S O S call for money. Nor did any of the young man's chance companions ever suspect that his father rated as a millionaire.

Two hours later Rusty was ready to depart—as casually as he had come. Old Dan Towers dragged his crippled foot to the door, to wave his son farewell.

"So long, Rusty!" he called.

"Adios, dad! See you later."

"Remember, Rusty," were old Dan's final words, "I'll be waiting for you—and your Rosita."

CHAPTER III.

ON THE TRAIL.

RUSTY TOWERS had no very definite plan in mind as he headed his cayuse toward the border. Chances that either of his two objectives would be quickly attained were remote, to say the least, and he was reconciled to an indefinite stay.

"I'll keep my ears open," he told him-

self, "and my mouth shut most of the time. They's been a lot of Crossed Arrows steers run over the line, and somehow, somewhere, a chap's bound to hit into trace of 'em. Dogies can't pop off into nothing, like a soap bubble when it busts. That ain't a tough line to puzzle out. But about Rosita—"

Rusty's musings broke off, for there, certainly, was a blind trail. Yet reason told him that Don Eugenio's party could not have come from very far within the heart of Mexico; the fiesta was too local in nature to attract visitors of that sort any very great distance. Though of course Rosita had said something about her father coming on business.

"I'll cover the country with a fine-toothed comb," Rusty promised himself. "Dad had the right idea. I was sure a poor weak sister to get discouraged so soon. Rosita's somewhere in Northern Mexico. All I got to do is find her."

Some miles south of the border he came upon a part of the Crossed Arrows posse, dejectedly plodding along on jaded ponies. Walt Dunlop, the foreman, was in command.

"Howdy, Rusty!" was the latter's astonished greeting.

"Howdy!" To which Rusty added the innocent query: "Get your men?"

"Hell, no!" the foreman exploded disgustedly. "Lost all trace of 'em in the lava beds. We ran out of water and had one hell of a time. But we ain't through yet."

"You sure they come this way?" Rusty asked, interested.

"Yeah. We found a Crossed Arrows steer—a cripple, looks like—that they had to shoot. The buzzards located him for us, but they hadn't gone so far with the remains that we couldn't read the brand.

"I sent the rest of the boys around west of the lava beds. We're planning on meeting 'em day after to-morrow. But what you doing down here, Rusty?"

"A little scouting on my own. I blew in at the ranch a couple days after you left. You're working the game from the wrong slant, Walt. One man's got a sight better chance of learning something than a whole flock of riders. Any mestizo you run into can't help but be wise to what you guys are combing the country for. Then the word's passed around, and your birds flutter off."

"Mebby so," Dunlop growled, "but don't forget that a solitary rider has also a damned good chance of never cashing in on the information he may pick up. I'm under orders from your dad to play the hand safe. He don't want any more of his wranglers killed."

"All right," was Rusty's indifferent response. Then, "Any of you fellows ever hear of a man that calls himself Don Eugenio Something-or-Other? He's got a hacienda within a hundred or hundred and fifty miles of the line."

This last was largely conjecture, but Rusty saw no harm in passing it on as an actual fact.

"Not me," Dunlop responded. Nor could any of the riders offer any suggestion of value. "What you want this fellow for?" the foreman demanded.

"Oh, personal reasons," Rusty answered vaguely. "Well, adios, you guys. I'm riding."

"Better trail along with us," the foreman advised.

"Can't afford to," Rusty grunted briefly.

"You can't afford not to," was Dunlop's grim comment. "But just as you say. Keep your eyes peeled, Rusty."

"Thanks, I will," Rusty rejoined dryly. And thereupon he and the Crossed Arrows riders parted company.

During the days which followed Rusty traveled through a wide expanse of territory, making a point of visiting the various small settlements sparsely scattered here and there. In such places he frequented nondescript barrooms, where mescal pulpue and other fiery intoxicants were on tap for the thirsty.

Rusty kept his ears ever finely attuned to catch stray bits of conversation, relying on the tongue-loosening properties of liquor to bring him information regarding cattle-rustling activities.

Often he feigned a drunken stupor, masking keen alertness under pretense of a mind befuddled by raw whisky, thus

hoping to lessen the suspicion-born restraint naturally attending the presence of a stranger. Many a picturesque and highly uncomplimentary reference to this dog of an Americano met his ears, but Rusty gave no sign that he heard.

Peons and half-breeds were thus betrayed into talking more or less freely before him, but Rusty, while he gained facts of spicy gossip regarding sundry personages of the sections he traversed, failed in the matters that vitally concerned him. He took pains to inform himself as to the ownership of big ranches or haciendas, many of them spreading over a vast domain, like independent feudal states. Beyond a doubt some establishment of this kind sheltered Rosita. But he learned nothing of her.

Continually Rusty's thoughts were fixed longingly on this girl of Mexico, on their one meeting, so tantalizingly brief—the meeting which had changed the whole tenor of Rusty's attitude toward life. His heart grew sick with the hunger of bitter longing to hear again the sweetness of her voice, the music of her soft laughter.

"If I hadn't been a hopeless nit-wit I'd 'a' got her whole name," he mused unhappily. "What I got to go on ain't hardly anything at all. Still, it's a lot better'n nothing." For Rusty was determined not to become discouraged.

After a time, finding that his plan of listening to chance conversation brought no definite results as to the masked leader of the raids on the Crossed Arrows ranch, Rusty began making cautious inquiries as opportunity offered.

His search lengthened into weeks, carrying Rusty ever farther to the west, where finally he ran across first tangible evidence of the rustlers—a partly cured steer hide, drying in the sun before the humble hut of a half-breed. This hide bore the familiar crossed arrows of his father's brand.

"You come quite a spell from home, old fellow," Rusty meditated aloud, regarding this evidence from his saddle. "Wish you could talk."

The man who owned the hut lounged indolently in his doorway, eying the speculative cow-puncher with a malevolent glance.

"Where'd you get it?" and Rusty jerked a thumb toward the hide. He spoke in the bastard Spanish that was used throughout the border region.

The mestizo's lips curled in a sneer which showed a row of white teeth against the brown of his face. All in all, the fellow was not unattractive to look at.

For an instant he seemed to meditate a defiant answer, but was perhaps deterred by the challenge he read in Rusty's narrowing eyes.

"I bought it, señor."

"The steer was stolen," Rusty informed him, quite unnecessarily.

The half-breed shrugged expressive shoulders.

"As to that, señor, who am I to know? I need meat for myself and my little ones. I buy the steer. That is all."

"Who'd you buy it off of?"

"That I cannot tell you, señor. His name—this seller of steers—quien sabe?"

Rusty imagined a note of triumphant malice in the fellow's tone, and was already regretting that he had betrayed an interest in the hide. This breed, lounging lazily before his squalid habitation, was no vaquero, and certainly had taken no active part in the cattle raids, even though he might have shared in the profits to a slight extent.

And on the other hand it was quite possible that he spoke the truth when claiming to have bought the animal.

"Oh, well,"—Rusty spoke indifferently, "cattle are public property—to men of spirit. What do a few steers amount to, one way or the other?"

"That is indeed true, señor," and again the breed's lips curled back from white teeth in a grin—or was it a sneer?

Rusty's fingers itched to administer proper punishment for this insolence, but he wisely refrained.

"I played the fool by saying anything a-tall to this greaser," he muttered to himself. "Should have kept my trap closed about that hide. Likely the fat's in the fire now, and getting into a squabble ain't going to pull it out."

Without another word he wheeled his mount and departed, the mestizo watching

him go with that same malevolent expression on his face.

Rusty rode for the nearest settlement, his mind definitely made up as to the immediate future.

"These cards I got I'll play at the pulque mill," he reasoned. "I ought to hit on something before long."

An hour later he was sipping a drink in one of those small barrooms, typical of the region. The dispenser of liquid refreshment was a young Mexican, whom Rusty sized up as rather a decent sort.

"I'm looking for a man with a spot of white in his hair here," Rusty's hand touched his right temple—"and a small pock mark on the chin."

Rusty narrowly watched the face of the bartender as he spoke, noting with extreme gratification that a flicker of emotion—perhaps fear, perhaps merely interest—passed over his features.

"Right in the bull's-eye," Rusty chuckled to himself. "I'm sure getting warm now." Then aloud: "You know anybody that answers the description?"

"What is his name, señor?" the bartender asked guardedly.

Rusty laughed with engaged frankness.

"Why, I don't know his name, but a certain party—a friend of mine—told me about him. 'Look up this man with the white streak in his hair and the pock mark in his chin. He's the chap you want,' he says to me. Can you tell me where to find him?"

The barkeep opened his mouth to reply, but no words came. He stood as if frozen, lips parted, staring past Rusty's shoulder.

"Why do you wish to see this man whom you describe so strangely, señor?" a smooth voice purred.

Rusty whirled in astonishment, for when he entered the barroom it had contained no other customer. Evidently a third person had just come in, so silently that neither he nor the bar attendant heard the newcomer's arrival.

The man who had thus surprised them was dressed as a vaquero, and Rusty promptly admitted to himself that never in all his checkered career had he encountered an individual more villainous in appearance. And in striking contrast to a face stamped with a diabolic love of evil for evil's own sake, was the soft, almost effeminate voice, dropping words like liquid honey.

"You know this man I was asking about?" Rusty demanded, shrewdly sizing up the intruder.

"It is possible, señor," with a smile doubtless intended to be ingratiating, but which made the speaker look all the more unprepossessing. "But why do you wish to meet him?"

Rusty had a faint notion that the friendly bartender was trying to flash him some sort of warning, but his plans were instantly formed.

"I'm looking for a job," he said. "I understand this señor—who shall be nameless—can use riders of spirit and courage, brave fellows, who are willing to run risks for the love of adventure—and perhaps a little profit. How about it?"

"You know something, then?" the stranger whispered.

Rusty nodded.

"And I'm looking for a job," he added.

"It is indeed a pleasure to meet a señor like yourself," the vaquero said, and his voice was soft as the fur that sheathes a jaguar's claws. "I think it can be arranged. Come with me, señor. This is a matter which we had best discuss in private."

"A drink first?" Rusty suggested.

"A thousand thanks! To your health, señor!"

The young bartender served them with downcast face, Rusty following his actions with secret amusement.

"Probably thinks I'm dead and buried a'ready," the cow-puncher chuckled.

"Now, if you will be so kind as to come with me, I will take you to the señor. Perhaps you will find favor in his eyes. He is particular—this señor of whom we speak—but his eyes are never shut to the chance of securing caballeros of the kind he needs. I think he will be glad to see you."

"Sounds good to me," Rusty grunted shortly. "Lead on!"

Their horses waited at the hitching rail before the barroom. The riders mounted,

the vaquero starting off at a brisk pace that soon put them in open country.

"Where you headed?" Rusty demanded bluntly.

"Be patient, señor. It is not far that we must ride."

The journey continued with no further attempts at conversation, striking toward rough, broken country that marked the rise of a low range of detached mountains.

It had been late afternoon when Rusty and his new acquaintance left the small settlement. Now the sun was approaching the horizon, bathing the summits of distant mountains in a blaze of glory, while the western sky glowed a marvelous rose pink, shading off into various tints of orange and yellow, like a huge palmetto smeared with a profusion of rich colors.

"Right pretty," was Rusty's appreciative comment. "I bet they's lots of artists that would near give an arm for the chance to paint that sunset."

They rode abruptly into the shadows of a cañon.

"Now we are almost there, señor," the guide called reassuringly.

Five or ten minutes later he pulled in his mount, pointing up the slope to a rather sizable cabin, built of hewn logs, perched on a level spot above the cañon floor.

"We will find the señor there. The rest of the journey must be made on foot."

The vaquero swung gracefully from his mount as he spoke, and Rusty did likewise. Together they started the climb, Rusty close at his companion's heels as they toiled upward among huge bowlders that clung to the steep slope in seeming defiance of the law of gravity.

For an instant the vaquero disappeared from view around the side of a mass of granite. Rusty in turn rounded the rock—to find himself suddenly confronted by the livid face of the vaquero, eyes distended with hatred and the lust to kill.

"Pig of an Americano!" he grunted savagely, and the keen blade of a knife flashed in the fading light.

The treacherous thrust never landed. Rusty laughed aloud as he saw it flicker, and his left arm knocked the vaquero's hand to one side even as his Colt crashed in the cañon stillness. The Mexican lay where he fell, his face still contorted with the violent emotions which had attended his passing.

"Darn the luck!" Rusty complained aggrievedly. "I was scairt I'd have to salivate the ornery salamander. Seems like I ought to been able to get the information out of him first. But I hope it 'll be a lesson to me, as the guy said just before they hung him.

"Wonder if I'm really as soft-looking a sucker as this hombre played me for," and Rusty allowed himself the luxury of a cheerful grin. "Anyway, that's that, and I'm expressing the fervent hope that whenever I'm called upon to help a fellowman out of the world he'll be as deserving of my assistance as this side-winder in human form.

"Question now is—where do we go from here?"

Rusty glanced curiously up toward the cabin, where no sign of life was visible.

"Don't seem like this mysterious señor I'm so anxious to sign up with is on hand at the trail meet," he ruminated. "Guess I'll give the place a looksee anyhow."

Rusty climbed the remaining distance to the dark cabin, which from the outside gave every appearance of being quite deserted. Such, in fact, proved to be the case, nor was there any evidence that the building had been in use for several years.

Rusty rolled and lit a cigarette while pondering the situation. Certain things were by now reasonably clear in his mind.

First of all it was plain that the vaquero never had the slightest intention of taking Rusty to meet the mysterious señor—he with the white blotch of hair and the pock mark on his chin. Hearing Rusty's inquiries, the fellow had correctly sized him up as being on the rustlers' trail, and too hot for their comfort; therefore he had immediately taken steps to remove him by murder.

"Handed me that cock-and-bull story just to get me interested," Rusty told himself; "so he could drag me out of sight of folks at the village and plant a knife in my ribs where nobody but the buzzards would ever find the corpse.

"Likely he's one of the gang that raided our ranch; if I knew what he knows I'd be plenty wise. Trouble is, I don't know it, which is sad but true. Anyway I slipped something over on the hombre. *He's* out of the way, not me, and nobody 'll be tipping off the big boss to the potent fact that the Grim Reaper's whetting a scythe for the harvest.

"This señor, whoever he is, must have his hang-out not so very far from that village where I was to-day. Seems like a wise hunch to linger there or thereabouts and see what else might break loose."

Rusty left the dead vaquero where he lay, returning to the horses. Removing saddle and bridle from the one ridden by his would-be murderer, he turned the brute loose, hiding the equipment among the rocks, where no chance passer-by would notice it. Then Rusty mounted his own horse and rode down toward the mouth of the cañon, where, having found a suitable spot, he rolled up in his blanket and slept as one whose conscience is clear.

The following morning Rusty set forth with the notion of spending a few days in general scouting, to see what might develop. For the time he abandoned his idea of revisiting the village, through fear that some friend of the vaquero's might have seen the two of them ride out together. Rusty desired that the Mexican's untimely demise should not be made the subject of inquiry—at least for the present.

Nothing of interest developed until afternoon of the second day, when it seemed to Rusty that an unusual number of horsemen were abroad, traveling singly, or in groups up to half a dozen or so in number; together with an occasional carriage that was occupied by members of a somewhat higher stratum of society. But all were headed in the same general direction.

Rusty's curiosity was stirred to the point of emulating the example of all these other people. They were headed somewhere, and Rusty did likewise. He didn't know where he was going, but he was on his way.

At length he encountered an aged priest, who smiled at him in friendly fashion.

"Buenos dias, padre," said Rusty Towers, civilly.

"Buenos dias, hijo mio!" the old man responded. "It is easy to see that you are riding to the baile."

Rusty slapped his thigh.

"That's it, padre! I knew I was headed some place, but it never once occurred to me it was a baile. Now would you mind telling a chap, who's a stranger and far from home, just where this baile is to be pulled off?"

The padre's eyes twinkled in amused comprehension.

"It is indeed clear that you are a stranger, my son," said he. "The baile takes place to-night at the hacienda of Don Perenzo. Every one is invited."

"That means me, then. Muchas gracias, padre. Adios! I'm on my way."

"Adios, hijo mio!"

The aged priest plodded on down the dust-laden road, while Rusty sat silent on his horse for a moment, thinking tardily of many other questions he might profitably have asked the padre. He was half mindful to turn back to pursue the conversation further.

"Oh, what's the use?" he muttered. "I'll find out what I want to know soon enough, if I sit tight. It seems like everybody's going to Don Perenzo's baile, and mebby this Señor Who-is-this 'll show up as big as life. Cayuse, shake your feet! We're going to a dance."

CHAPTER IV.

THE BAILE.

RUSTY knew not the location of Don Perenzo's hacienda, scene of the baile that evening, but clearly the movement of other travelers bound in that direction would provide him with accurate guide posts. Accordingly he continued, serenely confident of arriving in time for the festivities.

Toward evening he found himself approaching a rather imposing collection of buildings. Everywhere was bustle and confusion, scores of guests milling about, with new ones constantly arriving from all points of the compass.

Seductive odors met the nose, wafted

from the roasting pits, where the carcasses of three steers and a half dozen sheep were being barbecued.

The uninvited guest tied his pony to one end of a hitching rail, and then proceeded to wander around, curious as to the occasion which prompted this lavish display of hospitality. No one paid him the least attention.

At length Rusty accosted a vaquero of about his own age.

"What's back of all the excitement?" he inquired.

"You do not know, *senor?*"

"Thunderation!" Rusty grunted in good-natured derision. "If I knew I wouldn't be asking, would I? What's up?"

"Oh! The Don Perenzo is giving a baile, you understand."

Under his breath Rusty cursed the fellow's stupidity.

"Yes, yes!" he snapped impatiently. "I got that three hours ago from an old padre I met on the road. But why's he giving this baile? Don't be so tight with your facts."

"Don Perenzo has invited here his friends and neighbors to do honor to—"

A loud shout came from the direction of the roasting pits, evidence that the sweating corps of chefs had started hashing out barbecued meat and other highly-seasoned delicacies. Without a word of apology the vaquero broke short his explanation and galloped briskly toward the point of chief interest.

"Can you beat it?" Rusty grumbled. "And they talk about the never failing politeness of Spanish blood. That chap must figure there ain't enough chow to go around, and he aims to collect his at the first table. Women and children last, is his motto."

Rusty tried to pump information from one or two others, but all those present seemed concerned solely with the problem of filling themselves with food while the getting was good.

"Guess I might as well clamp on the nosebag myself," he reflected, abandoning for the time any efforts to learn what prompted the affair. "And meanwhile I'll keep an eye open for the chap I want in my business—the lad that shot Chuck Peters in cold blood. He's bound to be somewhere about the place, and when I spot him I'm liable to turn this baile into a Fourth of July picnic."

After the hunger of the crowd had been appeased—the thirst, also, for various casks of liquor were opened—the sound of music called young and old to the dance. Rusty quickly discovered that the affair was being given in two sections; middle class guests were entertained in an outdoor pavilion, some distance from the main buildings, while personal friends of Don Perenzo made free with the patio or any other part of the hacienda that took their fancy.

The broad veranda, agleam with gayly colored lanterns, served as an open air ballroom, the alluring strains of a waltz sounding forth. Several couples were already dancing.

"Guess I'll amble up and look the señoritas over," Rusty muttered. Then he suddenly gasped, "Great guns! Rosita might be here!"

A feeling of guilt oppressed him, for events of the past two days had centered Rusty's attention on the rustler's trail.

"You're a hell of a guy," he accused himself, "to forget her, even for a minute! Serve you right if Rosita was here and wouldn't speak to you!"

Quickly he slipped up toward the veranda, eager eyes searching for trace of a slender, graceful figure. Something within Rusty now assured him positively that Rosita was not far away. The music ceased, whereupon the dancers scattered; one couple paused an instant at the end of the veranda, in the full glare of lanterns suspended above their heads.

The cavalier bent toward his companion, whispering in her ear, and Rusty's heart gave a great throb. The girl was Rosita—his Rose of Mexico—dressed as he had last seen her, all in black, with the tight girdle of flaming crimson about her waist.

No other color combination would have suited so well her type of beauty. This time, instead of the jewel-studded comb, a red rose was twined among the locks of glossy, jet-black hair.

Hidden by shrubbery which clustered close around the veranda, Rusty drew near.

"Rosita!" he called in a low tone. "Rosita!"

At the sound of his voice the girl started violently, almost in affright, one hand pressing against her breast. Forgetful of the attentive caballero at her side, she quickly stepped down from the veranda, peering expectantly into the shadows.

"Who ees there?" she asked softly. "Who calls thus to Rosita?"

"Not a ghost anyway," Rusty chuckled. "Who'd you think it was?"

"Oh!" Rosita gasped. "Rus-tee. But where did you come from, *amigo mio?*"

"I've been hunting you all over Mexico," Rusty said reproachfully, as she came close to him. "Have you forgotten that night we met?"

"No, Rus-tee, I have not forgotten. There are many theengs we must talk about, you and I. One moment, Rus-tee, while I excuse myself to thees other friend who waits."

She returned to the veranda, speaking for a moment in Spanish to her partner, who bowed formally and withdrew.

"Come!" and Rosita slipped her hand within his arm, leading him to a rustic table and chairs at a little distance from the hacienda.

She sat down, facing him with a smile. "What have you to say for yourself? You have waited long in coming, Rus-tee, my friend." Despite the smile, a note of sadness lingered in Rosita's voice.

Rusty was quite perturbed at this attack.

"But why didn't you meet me as you promised?" he faltered. "I hung around that place for days."

"I am so sorry, Rus-tee. But for me to come—eet was impossible. Oh, eet was a terrible time. Thees Tia Maria, she learns how I go upon the streets, and when she tells my father, he ees furious. Never have I seen heem so angry. Early the next morning must we all return home so queekly. How then can I keep my rendezvous with my friend? But you—you must have known I could not come. Why did you not follow me?"

"I wanted to," Rusty confessed miserably, "but I didn't even know your full name, or where you lived. No one would tell me. I nearly went mad with longing for you, Rosita. But that's all past and gone. Now I've found you, you won't escape me again so easily."

"How did you at the last find where I was?" she whispered.

"I was riding on the trail of some cattle rustlers that ran steers from a ranch up north of the border. This afternoon I met an old padre who told me of the baile. So here I am, *carissima mia.*"

She smiled at the words of endearment, at the earnestness that underlay them, but in her smile was that same indefinite trace of sadness. In the joy of finding her again Rusty failed to notice it.

"I s'pose you live somewhere near here," he remarked. "Naturally you'd be at this baile."

Her eyes opened wide in dismay.

"Then you do not yet know, my friend?"

"Know?" Rusty echoed, at last vaguely aware that something might after all be wrong. "Know what?"

"My name ees Rosita Perenzo. Eet ees my father, the Don Eugenio Perenzo, who gives this baile."

"Mighty decent of him," Rusty murmured appreciatively, perceiving no cause for alarm in Rosita's admission. "He did not send me a special bid, but just the same I'm pleased to be among those present."

"And you have not heard—why—he has invited all the people here to-day?" She ignored the light-hearted gayety of his tone.

"Why, no. What's it all about, Rosita?"

"Eet ees to celebrate my betrothal," she murmured, her face averted. "To-morrow I am to be married."

"What!" The word came from Rusty's lips like a bullet.

"Eet ees true, *amigo mio.* My hand has been promised to thees man since I was a little child. Such is a custom among my people, you know."

"Who's the man?" Rusty growled,

striving to become accustomed to this new development.

"Don Enrique Mendez." her voice came in a faint whisper, all but inaudible.

"The lad who went out to see the bright red lights at the fiesta?" Rusty demanded, his eyes narrowing. "He's that kind, eh? Leaves his girl home while he goes out to burn up the town."

She nodded a silent answer to his inquiring glance.

"A lot older'n you, ain't he, Rosita?"

"He ees my father's friend," she whispered.

That admission was sufficient response to the question.

"Fine business!" Rusty grumbled. "Handing a young girl as sweet as you over to this ripe old Don Juan. Your dad must think a lot of you!"

"But he does, Rus-tee, my friend," Rosita protested loyally. "He loves me dearly. You do not understand. Weeth us eet ees often as among the people of Europe. A girl of good family does not choose her own husband. That ees all arrange by her parents. They theenk eet better so; they believe their judgment so much superior, you see."

"But did you want to marry this gay old party, Rosita?" Rusty demanded brutally. "You don't love him, do you?"

Her eyes now met his fearlessly.

"You know I do not love heem, *amigo mio*," she whispered. "But after all eet was no different weeth me than other girls of my race. The weesh of our fathers—eet ees law weeth us."

"Listen, Rosita!" he cried tensely. "Did you want me to come?"

"Yes, *amigo mio*," she murmured. "Every night I have prayed the good Virgin that you might come to me before eet was too late."

"You trust me, Rosita? You'll go with me?"

"Yes, Rus-tee. I weel go weeth you to the ends of the earth, if you weesh me to."

"For all you know, I'm nothing but a range rider. Likely this Don Enrique's a rich man."

"I care not for that," she cried passionately. "The good God made us for each other, Rus-tee, my dear friend. Take me away weeth you."

"Do you really love me, Rosita?" Rusty whispered the words softly, as if awestruck at this miracle that had come into his life.

"Of course I love you, Rus-tee," Rosita smiled, a bit tremulously. "I could not help eet, *amigo mio*. You were so brave, my Rus-tee, so splendid when you save me from that evil man at the fiesta. I theenk no girl could help loving you, Rus-tee," she added shyly. "You weel not let thees hateful old Don Enrique have me, weel you?" and Rosita shuddered. "Suppose you had not come, Rus-tee! Whatever would have happened to your poor Rosita?"

Young Mr. Rusty Towers, that case-hardened rider of the great range, felt himself in the spell of a deliriously wonderful dream. Through the encircling shrubbery the rhythm of dance music whispered melodiously, yet to the enraptured cow-puncher its sound was far less captivating than the whisper of Rosita's voice.

He was enveloped by the magic of her presence, by the sweet odor of her hair in his nostrils; held willing prisoner by soft round arms entwined around his neck. Reverently he kissed her.

"I'd call this pretty nice, eh, Rosita?"

"Eet ees heavenly, my Rus-tee. Never let me go from you again, weel you?"

"Don't you worry, Rosita," he assured her fondly. "I'll hold you now against the world."

But unwillingly he admitted to himself that sternly practical matters demanded his immediate attention. A very real danger surrounded them.

Don Eugenio had doubtless a young army of retainers at his disposal, and once he discovered the presence of this unwelcome guest at his baile things would be stirring in lively fashion. Prudence required that Rusty and Rosita slip quietly and stealthily away, the sooner the better.

"Listen, Rosita," he whispered, his voice now crisp and businesslike. "We'd best fade away, you and me. I've got a cayuse here, a stanch little beast that 'll carry

double without a whimper. It's only thirty miles or so to the border. They'll miss you after a few minutes, likely, but we'll have a start anyway—and it's dark. Nobody'd ever catch us. Are you game for it, Rosita?"

"Eet weel be glorious to ride away weeth you, my Rus-tee," she whispered. "Held close in your strong arms. Weeth you can no harm come to me."

"Let's travel, then," said Rusty Towers.

Hand in hand they started from the concealment afforded by the bushes, necessarily crossing a portion of the lawn illumined, though not brightly, by swinging lanterns.

"We must go queekly," the girl murmured, glancing over her shoulder fearfully. "To be discovered now—that would be terrible, Rus-tee."

"Don't be afraid, *carissima!*" and he pressed her hand reassuringly.

Suddenly a voice called sharply, peremptorily—a voice, one gathered, used to command and accustomed to obedience.

"Rosita!"

Two figures swiftly approached them.

Rosita, trembling, pressed close to Rusty in terror.

"Ah, Dios!" she gasped. "Eet ees my father—and weeth heem comes Don Enrique!"

Rusty abruptly thrust the girl around to his left side, thus leaving free his right hand, should occasion require use of the deadly pistol which sagged heavily against his thigh. Flight was now out of the question.

The two men drew near; and Rusty was gratified to observe that the situation was not further complicated by the presence of others.

"What does this mean, Rosita?"

The foremost of the two spoke savagely, in Spanish. Rusty, recognizing in this man his future father-in-law, glanced at him curiously in the half light.

He was under average height, but well filled out, and he strutted pompously; on the whole his appearance was rather ridiculous. His companion was taller and of a more athletic build.

From a silver case the latter extracted a cigarette, with an air of extreme boredom, as if this tiresome affair did not in the least concern him.

A torrent of Spanish burst from the lips of Don Perenzo, but Rusty did not hear it. He was hardly conscious even of Rosita's slim body shrinking against his.

Fixedly he stared at her father's choice, this supercilious Don Enrique, whose cupped hands held a flaring match, preparatory to lighting the cigarette between his lips. Its flame clearly lighted the fellow's sneering face, but it was not the sneer that attracted Rusty's attention.

In the black hair, just above the right temple, was a blotch of white; and deep in his firm chin, plainly visible, one of those characteristic scars left from smallpox.

CHAPTER V.

THE SHOW-DOWN.

RUSTY TOWERS felt no fear as he faced these two men—Rosita's outraged father and her ex-fiancé—only a profound sense of satisfaction that his twofold quest had proved wholly successful.

He had at last found Rosita, his rose of Mexico; and at the same time fortune had been doubly kind to him, for here was also the slayer of Chuck Peters, that masked outlaw who had led the raids on his father's steers—the man Rusty had sworn to kill in vengeance for the black murder of his friend.

"Business is sure pickin' up," Rusty mused, as he calmly regarded his adversaries. It was their move; not his.

Perenzo bubbled, like an erupting volcano, a storm of reproach on his daughter. From the tenor of his remarks Rusty gathered that she had missed a dance promised to the estimable Don Enrique, who had reported the lapse to the girl's father.

"Then he don't know anything at all yet," Rusty chuckled to himself. "Pretty soon now the poor devil's going to get a terrible shock."

His left arm still circled Rosita's waist.

"You keep still, Rosita," he whispered. "Let me do most of the talking."

"Who is this man?" Don Eugenio concluded his harangue, with a withering sneer at Rusty.

"Why, I'm nobody much," Rusty drawled; "only the guy that's going to marry your little Rose."

Perenzo drew himself sharply erect.

"Ha! You jest, señor! A sorry jest, indeed, as you shall presently learn to your sorrow. My daughter marries this friend of my youth, Don Enrique Mendez. It is I, Don Perenzo, who declares it."

"Fine words," Rusty grunted grimly, "but without substance, like the breeze that dies at sunset. I tell you Rosita has promised herself to me."

Perenzo swelled visibly under the pent-up force of his emotion.

"Looks more than ever like an overfat, overfed little bantam rooster," was Rusty's disrespectful thought.

"Sacramento!" Don Perenzo gulped, grabbing at his hair in a fury. "You lie, dog of an American! Rosita could not promise herself. She knew that I, her father, had long ago affianced her to my friend."

He appealed to the girl.

"Speak up, Rosita! Will you stand there and hear yourself defamed by this scum of the cattle ranges?"

"But it is the truth, my father," she sobbed. "I love this caballero. It is he only whom I wish to marry."

She spoke in Spanish, as the others, Rusty included, had been doing.

"Car-r-ramba!" Don Perenzo rolled the "r" like a telephone operator. "You are crazy, Rosita!"

"Forgive me, my father!" she cried piteously. "But I am not crazy—except perhaps with love of him. He saved me from worse than death."

"Ha!" Don Perenzo exclaimed, as if a sudden light had dawned.

He glanced meaningly at the silent Enrique, as if to say, "I feared something might come of that."

"Ha!" he repeated sternly. "So this, then, is that nobody, that rubbish of the ranges whom you met at the fiesta when you forgot that you are the daughter of Don Eugenio Perenzo!"

His words comprised both a statement and a question—an accusation as well. Silently Rosita nodded. Then:

"You will let me marry him, won't you, my father?"

"Ha!" Perenzo again snorted. "He has bewitched you, Rosita! You are not yourself. You must think that I am as crazy as you. Do you think that I, your father, Don Eugenio Perenzo, am wholly devoid of honor? Have I not given my sacred promise that you are to wed Don Enrique? Is my word lightly pledged and lightly broken, think you? Ha!" and Don Eugenio struck something of an attitude; it might have been imposing, had it not savored too strongly of burlesque absurdity. Of this, however, the worthy don was quite unconscious.

During this time the festivities of the baile had been going on in full swing, all the celebrators apparently ignorant of the fact that a dangerous rival to Don Enrique's hopes of a wedding on the morrow had materialized out of nowhere. Rusty was rather surprised that the scene had been thus far unobserved.

"Listen to me, child!" Perenzo forced himself to a semblance of calmness. "You must be reasonable. Supposing for once that it were possible for you to marry this upstart against my wishes—what would become of you? From his garb you can see that he is no better than a range rider, who earns in a month perhaps a hundred pesos if he be lucky. Whence then would come the dainty things you love so much? The silken garments next your delicate skin, the costly gowns that drape your slender body, the jeweled slippers that sheathe your pretty feet?

"I have brought you up in luxury, Rosita. Joining your lot with this fellow's will bring you to poverty, like that of the wretched peons. Instead of having servants eager to obey your slightest wish, you yourself will have to toil like the meanest of waiting girls. Think of these things, Rosita. Ponder them well!"

Rosita misunderstood the motive behind her father's words.

"Then you will let me marry him, my father!" she cried. "All these luxuries you

speak of will I gladly go without for his dear sake. You will let me, won't you?"

"No, foolish child," he retorted. "Your father thinks too dearly of you to permit this mistake. You are to wed Don Enrique to-morrow. He will gratify your every desire, even as I, your father, have always done."

"Rather would I kill myself!" Rosita gasped.

"All we're doing is talking," Rusty observed mildly, "and not getting any place."

He turned to Don Perenzo.

"You call me a range rider. All right, let it go that way. But range rider or not, I'd be a better husband for your Rosita than that spavined excuse of slippery manhood you aim to tie to her for life. He's a murderer and a cattle rustler! A price is on his head north of the border!"

"*Por Dios!*" Perenzo gasped, turning pale. "You insult my friend, my guest, my son-to-be!" He turned to the other. "You heard what says this pig, Enrique! What shall be his fate? You I give the satisfaction of deciding."

Mendez tossed away his cigarette.

"A pig have you well called him, Eugenio. I would not sully my hands to kill him myself. But he shall die. We will turn him over to some of my Indians back in the hills. They have a shrewd way with prisoners, these Yaquis."

"No, no!" Rosita cried fearfully. "Not that!"

Rusty quieted her with a reassuring pressure from his hand.

"Don't I have something more to say about this proposition?" he inquired plaintively. "I ought to, seems like, being's I got a personal interest."

"You have said already enough to assure your death sentence," Perenzo told him sternly.

"Talk, talk, nothing but talk!" Rusty groaned. "I'd hate to start any rough stuff at Rosita's party, but you chaps don't seem aware that I could kill the two of you before you could do more'n let out a wild yell for help. I don't want to hurt you," he added to Perenzo, "because I'm planning to be in the family, but 'most any minute I'm liable to forget myself and turn loose on your cattle rustling playmate."

Don Enrique appeared a trifle less bored and self-complacent, for he recognized the deadly earnestness behind the threat. Even Perenzo seemed less sure of himself.

"But he is no cattle rustler, this friend of mine!" he protested. "He is a man of honor—a high born caballero."

"You think so, eh?" Rusty grunted grimly. "Just shows how much you've got to learn. He hasn't denied what I said. Why don't you ask him? Though he'll probably deny it," he added as an afterthought.

"How about those Crossed Arrow steers?" he demanded of Mendez. "If you value your life, tell the truth for just this once."

Don Enrique shrugged his shoulders.

"To help oneself to gringo steers—that is not stealing," he declared.

"We call it stealing north of the line," Rusty observed, "but likely we're more fussy about trifles than you are. And about that wounded cowboy you murdered?"

"Maybe I have killed a gringo cowboy now and then." Another heedless shrug of the shoulders. "What of it? That is a virtue, not a crime."

"To be sure!" Don Perenzo added loyally. "What of that! And to-morrow you shall wed my Rosita, while the Indians amuse themselves with your enemy."

He put a small whistle to his lips and blew a shrill blast. Three or four servants appeared as if by magic, so quickly indeed that Rusty concluded they had been hidden not far away, awaiting their master's summons.

Rusty found himself wondering how Don Eugenio had been led to take these steps. It might have been from the man with whom Rosita had been dancing just prior to his own arrival.

"Pedro! Ramon! Rodrigo!" the don ordered harshly. "Catch me yon infamous dog who has dared lay hands on my daughter! To-morrow he dies!"

"You forced my hand!" Rusty cried. "I wasn't hunting for this!"

His pistol flashed from its sheath, its crashing report a rude interruption to the

dance hall music, which still sounded. Mendez went down at the first shot, a crumpled heap.

Again and again the deadly gun spat fire, taking toll of the attacking force. Perenzo's men promptly broke, retreating in terrified disorder. Rosita, half fainting, clung desperately to her protector.

"Oh!" she gasped, and reverted to the quaint English that Rusty so much loved to hear. "Now of a sureness weel they keel you, Rus-tee."

"That's a poor guess, Rosita!" he cried.

To him this period of intense activity had come as a welcome relief from the endless and fruitless discussion which had preceded it. "Come!" he added, grasping her by the wrist. "All we got to do is reach my cayuse. Once on his back, all Mexico can't stop us!"

On all sides of them was confusion, startled cries from the guests, questions as to what had happened—what it was all about. Don Eugenio was raving like a madman, apparently commanding his servants to pursue and capture this gringo who had stolen his daughter, a task which carried no huge appeal. The gringo had proved far too adept and quick in the use of his pistol to encourage rash pursuit.

"Shoot him!" Perenzo screamed, from a safe distance. "Kill the dog of an Americano!"

But no shots were fired, through fear of hitting Rosita. Paper lanterns, hanging at intervals, threw sufficient light to show her close to this intrepid marauder who had carried off the girl under the very nose of Don Perenzo.

Thus the two found no concerted effort made to stop their progress, as they darted toward the point where Rusty had tied his horse. There, however, a devastating discovery awaited them.

The animal was gone! Nor were any of the other mounts, left by their owners prior to Rusty's arrival at the baile, now hitched in this particular spot. All had been removed!

"Not so good!" Rusty grunted. "I'd sure call that fast work for somebody. Things 'll break wrong a heap if I don't get a cayuse right soon."

He spoke to the frightened girl, clinging to his arm. "Where can we get a horse, Rosita mia?"

Her answer was a sudden, terrifying shriek, but it came too late to warn Rusty. Close by the hitching rail grew a clump of bushes.

From this the shadowy figure of a man had stealthily arisen, directly behind Rusty, a pistol held club fashion, by the muzzle, in his hand. Rosita had cried out as she saw this man aiming a vicious blow at her lover's head.

Rusty heard the scream, and then it seemed that the entire earth must have fallen on top of his skull. Stars and planets flashed like exploding rockets before his eyes; then everything went blank.

CHAPTER VI.

CAPTURED.

WHEN consciousness at length returned to young Mr. Rusty Towers, his mind remained, for a few moments, more or less at a loss. Happenings of the preceding night were mingled hazily in a vague confusion, his faculties dulled to all sensation save a splitting headache. Slowly a portion of the mists cleared away.

"Hum!" Rusty mused thoughtfully, feeling with due tenderness of an egg-shaped lump that marked his point of contact with the pistol butt. "That was sure some wallop. Lucky I'm a thick-headed cuss, or it'd just about ruined me."

He was lying on a cot, unbound, which fact both surprised and gratified him.

"Guess they figured I'd never wake up," he reasoned, "or else if I did I'd be about as husky as a new born baby. Mebbe that last notion ain't so far wrong, either. Can't say as I feel like cleaning up a nest of wild cats right now. This head I'm wearing is a lulu. Wow!"

With some effort Rusty rolled over on one side, in order to widen his range of vision. He was incarcerated in some sort of an outbuilding, strongly constructed of logs. On a chair near the door sat a guard, rifle across his knees, dressed in the typi-

cal costume of the Mexican rider, or vaquero. The sight of this armed man recalled to Rusty's mind his own pistol, and he twisted his neck to glance down toward the holster, which, of course, was empty.

"Naturally they'd pull my teeth," he reflected. "Couldn't expect anything else. Be reasonable, fella!"

More and more the fog that beclouded Rusty's brain was fading, until he recalled everything that had followed his unexpected encounter with Rosita: their interrupted flight and the sudden pistol battle; the discovery that his horse was missing, followed instantly by the vicious blow from behind that knocked him cold.

"Hum!" he meditated. "Looks like the plot's getting a bit complicated. Wonder what's become of Rosita. Probably locked up by that loving dad of hers. Well—one thing's sure; the merry wedding bells won't peal out to-day," and Rusty's thoughts dwelt with profound contentment on the huddled shape of Don Enrique Mendez, dropped by the first bullet which left his gun at the beginning of the mêlée.

"As a bridegroom that Don Enrique's a total loss," Rusty ruminated. "Even if not plumb salivated he's in no shape to take over the sober responsibilities of married life. But I wish I knew what all's happened. Mebbe I can acquire a few facts from this bird detailed to nurse me."

He sat up on the edge of his cot, whereupon the walls of the small room began rocking gently back and forth, like a ship riding gigantic swells. Rusty shut his eyes, and the dizzy spell presently passed, at least the worst of it. He managed to grin at the guard, who watched him attentively.

"How about a bucket of water?" Rusty suggested, his grin broadening with an ingratiating air of companionship. "I feel like I'd been on a glorious spree."

The Mexican smiled in response to Rusty's grin—a friendly smile, though totally uncomprehending.

"I've learned something," the prisoner thought to himself. "This lad is a fairly decent scout and he doesn't know English. That goes down for what it's worth."

He repeated his request in mongrel Spanish, whereupon the guard instantly rose from his chair, bringing Rusty a dipper of water from a cask in one corner.

"*Muchas gracias, amigo!*" and Rusty drank gratefully, bathing his throbbing head with what remained of the precious liquid.

He was refreshed enough to feel the need of a smoke, and manufactured a cigarette from the makings which every rider invariably carried. Rusty tossed the papers and sack of tobacco over to the vaquero, who readily accepted this little token of amity.

"Guess I stirred things up a little last night," the prisoner observed, scratching a match on the sole of his boot. He spoke in border Spanish, naturally.

"Of a truth you did, señor," the vaquero assented, showing white teeth in a smile.

"This fellow calling himself Don Mendez," and Rusty expelled a cloud of smoke. "How did he make out?"

"He is dead, the soul of a coyote!" The words were spoken in a vindictive snarl. "He has received just punishment for his many misdeeds, son of perdition that he is!"

Rusty found this unexpected outburst quite acceptable. Luck was with him in one respect, for it seemed that Don Perenzo had chanced to select as guard for his prisoner a man who had cordially disliked the late Don Enrique.

"And those other fellows I shot?" he questioned.

"They were not fatally wounded, señor. It is thought that all may perchance recover."

"I'm glad of that," Rusty said simply. "I didn't have any quarrel with those poor devils. What's Don Perenzo planning to do with me, do you know?" he added.

"Alas, señor! It grieves me to say it, but Don Eugenio swears he will hang you the same day they bury his dead friend, whom you killed."

"That's a pleasant thought," Rusty grunted. "When are the obsequies scheduled?"

"Day after to-morrow, señor. You have yet two more days to live."

"Two days are a lot—sometimes," Rusty declared. Then, after a moment of

hesitation, "What has become of Señorita Rosita—she that was to marry this human skunk?"

"I cannot say positively of her, señor, but news has been whispered forth from the hacienda, by way of her maid, that Señorita Perenzo remains locked in her room, weeping as with a broken heart. Doubtless she mourns the death of her lover, this thrice-damned Don Enrique," and the vaquero grinned meaningly.

"That's most likely what the señorita is weeping over," Rusty agreed gravely. "But there's one thing I can't understand, amigo. If Don Perenzo really loves this beautiful daughter of his, why was he willing to shackle her forever to that pole-cat."

"A puzzle, indeed, señor. But Mendez was a shrewd devil, who did as he wished with Don Perenzo. Some have thought that Don Eugenio feared him, perhaps because of a guilty secret the two caballeros shared in common. Me—I do not think so. I believe that Don Perenzo was merely captivated by the other, willfully blind to his many faults, and emphasizing his virtues—if so be he possessed any."

"You don't seem to think much of Mendez yourself, amigo."

The vaquero swore savagely.

"You have said it, señor. I have at one time a sister, who is comely and pleasing to the eye. Don Enrique seen her in an evil day. It is not an agreeable story, señor. He had a way with women, this Don Enrique. Often have I told myself that sometime I would kill him, though the good padre commanded me I should not. I think you have saved my soul from the stain of murder, señor, and for that I am grateful to you."

"Humph!" Rusty grunted. "Killing off riff-raff like that ain't exactly my idea of murder."

For a time he pondered the affair, shrewdly sizing up the young Mexican before him, speculating on the kind of material he had to deal with.

"You work for Don Perenzo, is it not so, amigo?" he presently queried.

The other nodded.

"He's a good boss, I expect. Pays you pretty fair wages, don't he?"

The vaquero laughed mirthlessly.

"Yes, señor; if you count thirty pesos a month good pay. For my part, I hardly consider it a princely reward for my toil."

"How'd you like five thousand American dollars—not pesos—in your hand all at once?"

The Mexican's eyes glowed covetously.

"That would be wealth untold, señor. But why talk about things which cannot happen?"

"Get me a gun—a forty-five that'll fit this belt of shells I still got; have a horse handy after dark to-night. It's worth five thousand."

The swarthy face of the vaquero turned pale.

"Por Dios, señor! That would be a madness. Don Perenzo would have me drawn asunder by wild bulls if I were guilty of such treachery."

"Naturally you wouldn't hang around and give him a chance to get nasty. Deliver the goods—and then fade out of the picture pronto."

"But the five thousand American dollars, señor—"

"Oh, yes," said Rusty. "You've heard of Dan Towers, who owns the Crossed Arrows ranch northeast of here, 'way up over the line?"

"Of a certainty! Who has not heard of Señor Towers? He is far richer even than Don Perenzo, my employer."

"He is my father," said Rusty.

The vaquero smiled craftily.

"No doubt, señor! I myself am nephew to the president of Mexico."

Rusty grinned good-naturedly. So far as he could now see, his sole hope lay in this Mexican, and things were far too desperate to warrant any display of temper. Decidedly it was a time for a very fine type of diplomacy.

"I don't blame you for not believing me, amigo," he said. "But it is the truth."

"Why should the son of Señor Towers be wandering alone in Mexico?" the vaquero objected.

"A fair question, and I'll give you a fair answer. My father's ranch has several times been raided by a band headed by a masked outlaw, whose black hair had a

blotch of white, and whose chin carried the mark of smallpox. On his last raid this man shot a friend of mine, who lay on the ground. For that I swore to kill him. I crossed the border alone—in that way my chance of success was better—and I rode for days, ever seeking this man. Last night I found him. My friend is avenged—as you know."

"I think you speak the truth, señor," the vaquero admitted thoughtfully. "Your face is not the face of a man given to lies. But this that you ask of me is dangerous. One cannot idly take such chances for a stranger."

"True enough," Rusty assented, "and you'd have to go to the Crossed Arrows ranch to collect your pay. What time is it now?" for he suddenly realized that the light outside was growing dim.

"It is after sunset, señor. You lay unconscious for nearly a day."

A tumult of thoughts raced through Rusty's brain at the bad news. Far more time had elapsed than he suspected. He could not, of course, leave without Rosita, but there remained the problem of getting in touch with her.

It began to look as if his attempt at bribing the guard might after all succeed, but the whole affair had to be planned very adroitly. Rusty still felt weak and dizzy, certainly in no shape to carry through so desperate a scheme as the one now forming in his mind.

"Twenty-four hours later is the best bet," he reasoned. "To-morrow night." He turned to the Mexican.

"I'm offering you the chance of a lifetime, *amigo*," said he. "Five thousand dollars for a good horse and a gun. That would make you a rich man. No longer would you have to work hard for thirty pesos a month. You can ride to the Crossed Arrows Ranch, and there collect the money. If in addition you want a job, it is yours as long as you wish—at three times the pay Perenzo gives you."

"But suppose I do my part, and you fail even so to escape," the vaquero protested. "I go to this Señor Towers and say he is too pay me thus and so. He laughs—and it may be holds me responsible for the trouble that has befallen his son."

"We'll fix that up," Rusty declared confidently, "though if I once get started nothing 'll stop me. I'll give you a letter to my father, telling what you've done for me. Depend upon it, he'll pay you what I say. And if it happens that I don't pull through, he'll pay you ten times that much to guide a crowd of his riders back here. They'd go through this outfit like a charge of shot through a sage hen."

"But if Don Perenzo finds it out—" The Mexican was still hesitating.

"Shucks!" Rusty laughed. "He won't find out unless you tell him yourself, and that ain't likely. How long are you on duty here?"

"Till midnight. Then another man will take my place. It will be impossible to arrange things for to-night, señor."

"I don't want to go away to-night; to-morrow 'll do fine, and that 'll give you more time. Play straight with me, and you'll never regret it."

"I will play straight, señor. Fear not."

"All right. Now what's the chance of collecting a little chow? My bread box is plumb empty. Some nourishment might stop my head from buzzing."

"I can give you food, señor. Now, if you wish."

"Trot it out," Rusty ordered.

He sat on the edge of his cot while eating, and the room appeared to him less like a ship in a hard gale. But there was no getting away from the fact that young Mr. Towers was still a very sick man.

"I'll be all right by to-morrow, though," he mused. "Gosh, I got to be!"

When it became totally dark outside the guard lighted a small oil lamp. Rusty lay back on the bed, considering his fortune—or lack of it—from all angles. But most of all he thought of Rosita.

He wondered if he dared trust this friendly vaquero with a message for her, unable to decide on taking that risk, yet seeing no other way out.

Suddenly there came a light tap at the door, which the guard opened. Rosita swept in, regally, as befitted the daughter of Don Eugenio Perenzo.

"It is I, Señorita Perenzo," she told the vaquero in an imperious tone. "I have come to see the prisoner. You may wait outside, muchacho."

"Sí, señorita," the young fellow muttered with a submissive inclination of his head, obeying her command.

Instantly all Rosita's haughtiness dropped from her shoulders, like a mantle. She darted across the narrow room, dropping on her knees by Rusty's bed.

"Oh, my poor Rus-tee!" she cried, tears streaming down her cheeks. "All day have I been as one crazee from fear for you. How are you, *amigo carissimo?*"

"A lot better'n I was just before you came," and Rusty smiled fondly at her.

The girl's soft fingers, running tenderly through his hair, located the lump. She gave a gasp of horror.

"Oh, my dear! Your poor head! What a shame eet ees that nobody has cared for you! My father"—shuddering—"almost do I commit the vile sin of hating heem for thees. I didn't dream how cruel, how heartless he was, my father.

"I have begged heem on my knees, but not one inch weel he yield. He swears by all the holy saints that since I cannot marry Don Enrique I must go for the rest of my life to the Convent of Our Lady. You—"

Her voice choked in a sob, unable to deliver the sinister message that Rusty had already received. His arm closed tightly around her slim waist.

"Don't think about that, Rosita," he whispered. "We'll pull through all right. But, however did you get out?"

"I have bribed my maid," she murmured, "weeth a string of precious pearls, to let me away for only five minutes. All day till now have I been locked in my room, Rus-tee. I want a gun to breeng you, but eet ees impossible. Your Rosita is worthless, my Rus-tee; she cannot help you in your trouble. Not one small little theeng can she do!"

"That's all right, Rosita," Rusty told her. "I've got everything all fixed. This guard will get me a gun and a horse for to-morrow night. I'll be ready to leave at nine o'clock."

The girl gazed at him in bewilderment.

"You have done all thees, Rus-tee; so soon, and when you were so badly hurt. Ah, but you are superb, my Rus-tee!" Pride and tenderness both gleamed through the tears in Rosita's starry eyes as she looked at him. "How did you work thees miracles?"

"I'll tell you that later. Listen to what I say. Can you slip out to-morrow night?"

"Yes!" she whispered tensely. "Where shall I meet you, Rus-tee?"

"You know the little clump of trees close to the pits where they roasted the carcasses of steers yesterday?"

She nodded.

"I'll be there with the horse at nine. We'll strike for the border together, *carissima.*"

"I understand. Now must I go, *amigo mio,* lest my father finds what has happened. You can trust thees man who guards you?"

"I think so. Adios, Rosita."

"Au revoir, Rus-tee. Do not fail your Rosita, who weel pray all through the night for you."

"I won't fail you," Rusty promised grimly. "Hell and high water can't stop me."

Rosita slipped away as quietly as she had come, and the guard returned to duty. Rusty glanced sharply at the fellow, to see how he had taken this visit from his employer's daughter, finding no cause for alarm.

"Let's get this thing all settled," said he. "You go off duty at midnight, and another man takes your place?"

"That is so, señor," the vaquero assented.

"When will you be back on the job here?"

"At noon to-morrow."

"Sure of that, are you? It's pretty important."

"I see no reason why not, señor. Of course, in this life no things are certain."

"All right; we'll let it go at that. When you come you are to smuggle in to me a pistol. An hour after dark you let me out of here, leading me to a good horse. Then you are free to look out for yourself. Get the layout?"

"Surely, señor. It will be easy to accomplish."

"It ought to be. Now I've been thinking it might be better if I pretended to be a sight worse off than I am. I don't want to stir up suspicion by getting well too fast, so when the next guard comes in I'll be flat on my back, dead to the world. And it might be a wise hunch for you to drop a remark to the effect that my goose is about cooked, or something like it. Get me, *amigo?*"

The vaquero smiled knowingly.

"We will fool them, señor, you and I," he said.

"Before you go I'll absorb the rest of the food you got," Rusty observed. "I won't have any chance afterward."

Three hours later he ate another meal, delighted at finding new strength flowing through his veins. The dizziness had now wholly passed, and the pain from his bruised head was less severe.

"A few hours' sleep and I'll be back in rare form," he thought contentedly, lying back on his cot.

At midnight, according to schedule, the relief guard came on duty.

"How is he, this pig who is to hang?" he asked.

"I think he will rob the gallows," Rusty's friend said carelessly. "Most of the time he is out of his head, with mutterings that make no sense."

"Too bad, *amigo*. I had hopes of seeing him dangle."

"A dipper of water now and then may perchance aid in keeping him alive till the appointed time. Adios!" And the first vaquero departed.

Rusty took a cue from the remarks passed between the two, and at such times as he was awake played well the part of a man in the throes of delirium.

In the morning food was brought—enough for both prisoner and guard—but Rusty, though the smell of hot coffee nearly drove him distracted, kept on valiantly with the self-imposed rôle of a man at the very gates of death.

The hours of daylight dragged even more slowly than those of darkness, but finally came time for another shift. There was a stir outside—the sound of subdued voices; the door of the makeshift prison swung open.

"Does he give you any trouble, this Americano?" a harsh voice demanded.

"No more than a sick puppy. I think they will have to hang a corpse."

But blank dismay was gripping at Rusty's heart. All his carefully laid plans came tumbling about his ears, for this new voice sounded like that of an utter stranger. Warily he opened one eye, and his worst fears were confirmed.

Something had gone amiss somewhere along the line. This man who now came on duty was not his friend of the day before, the one bribed to aid his escape.

"Good night!" thought Rusty. "This is a hell of a note! They've switched guards on me!"

CHAPTER VII.

TRAIL'S END.

ONCE certain that his original scheme had missed fire, Rusty wasted no time in vain regrets. He was a resourceful chap, was young Mr. Towers, and immediately his fertile brain began casting about for a new way out of the difficulty.

Through eyes that were nearly closed he surveyed the man who had just come on duty.

He was dressed much as the first—the one who had been unable to keep his promise to bring the prisoner a gun—but was older, his thin, cruel features stamped with a look of cunning and duplicity.

"Can't risk trying to bribe him," Rusty thought. "He'd double cross me sure."

Rusty's eyes gleamed at sight of a Colt .45 slung to a brass studded cartridge belt around the fellow's waist.

"There's a gun for me," he mused. "All I got to do is get it."

The vaquero sent a careless glance at the prisoner, yawning indolently as he sat down in the chair, tipping it back against the wall. Yet he nevertheless kept his eyes on the man he was detailed to guard.

From this whole discouraging train of

events Rusty derived a single ray of hope —the fact that his keeper believed him to be utterly helpless.

"I'll play that line for all it's worth," he told himself.

Again began the drag of weary minutes, slowly lengthening into hours, while Rusty took care to do nothing likely to arouse suspicion. It was hard, that passive waiting, but he knew everything depended on the success of his acting.

"I can't play my last cards till dark," was the thought in his mind. "It'd help a lot if that guy would drop off to sleep, but he don't look to me like the sleeping kind. He's too dog-goned efficient."

After what seemed to the prisoner a whole eternity, the gradually fading light warned him that night was at last approaching.

"I won't have to wait much longer," he thought grimly.

Presently the vaquero eased himself from his seat with a grunt, and lighted the lamp, which stood on a small table, its feeble, smoky flame giving little more light than a candle.

The Mexican's shadow fell on the opposite wall—a huge, grotesque shape. Rusty lay motionless on his bed; it had, in fact, been hours since he moved.

What had happened to the first man was wholly uncertain; quite likely the change in guards had come solely through chance, and it was barely possible that he might yet attempt to carry out his share of the agreement. But Rusty could not depend on anything so problematical, feeling that in this desperate emergency success hinged solely on his own unaided efforts.

He desired to time the final episode in order to meet Rosita at the appointed place by nine o'clock, but was now handicapped by having to guess at the hour.

"I'd rather be early than late," he thought. "Here goes!"

The stillness of night was fractured by a wild, unearthly yell that burst from the lips of the supposedly dying man. Rusty sat bolt upright, glaring about him through eyes that glittered insanely in the lamplight from under disheveled hair.

Startled, the vaquero leaped to his feet, reaching for the gun at his hip. Rusty's fingers clawed spasmodically at his chest; then his breath seemed to choke; he wheezed in a horrible fashion, falling back to the cot.

A powerful shudder convulsed his frame, and after that he lay still. The whole performance was tremendously realistic.

The vaquero passed a hand over his brow, replacing the pistol in its sheath.

"He has cheated the gallows as they said he would, this dog of an Americano," he muttered. "He is dead. Of what use to remain here and guard a corpse— Don Perenzo will be sorry to hear it. But perhaps the fellow is not yet quite dead."

He drew near to the prisoner's bed, glancing down at the motionless form outstretched before him; then bent his head, one ear pressed against Rusty's left breast, to detect the faintest whisper of a heartbeat.

"*Madre de Di*—" he gasped, as the supposed corpse came to life with paralyzing abruptness.

The vaquero's exclamation remained unfinished, for two hands gripped his throat, muscular fingers closing tight remorselessly, shutting off all power to speak or even breathe.

Thrashing about like two maddened animals, the pair struggled desperately, rolling off the cot to the floor with a series of resounding bumps. But all the time Rusty kept that fatal strangle hold he had secured, holding the other so close to him that his flailing arms could do no damage.

Rusty was below par physically, a natural result of the injury he had received; but that disadvantage was more than made up for by the total surprise of his sudden attack and the grip he maintained on his antagonist's windpipe.

The vaquero was no weakling, and under ordinary conditions would have been a dangerous rough and tumble fighter. But the man doesn't live who can long keep up with the equivalent of rawhide bands pulled tight around his throat. So in the present case.

The Mexican's struggles grew weaker, but Rusty didn't yield an inch; not until the body he clutched grew limp did he re-

lax his grasp, and then watchfully, a little at a time. But the vaquero was through, and an instant later Rusty had his gun.

To make sure of a good job he bound and gagged the fellow, leaving him sprawled helpless on the cot where he himself had been lying so long. Warily he slipped from the outbuilding, glancing about for any evidence that the sounds of their struggle had occasioned an alarm.

Everything seemed quiet. One or two lights glowed through the tree from the hacienda, a hundred yards away.

"So far so good," the late captive muttered. "Wonder if Rosita could be on deck now."

Moving with due caution Rusty turned his steps toward the meeting place. The grove by the roasting pits was deserted.

"She ought to be here," he muttered uncertainly. "I know it's nine; later, mebbe."

A disquieting thought occurred to him at that instant. Rosita had seemed confident of her ability to escape from the hacienda, but her father could easily prevent it if he had any notion of her intentions.

"Looks like this whole proposition was up to me," Rusty mused. "I don't seem to have any luck a-tall when I depend on other folks. Oh, well, at that, I ain't got any just cause to complain—yet. Now about a cayuse—guess I better scout around and locate the stables."

At the rear of the hacienda he presently found a low barnlike structure, an occasional stamp and the characteristic odor proclaiming that horses were within. His eyes caught a moving light which resolved itself into a man carrying a lantern, doubtless busied with some belated chores about the barn. Rusty entered, keeping well to the shadows.

"Guess I ought to collect a horse and saddle out of this combination," he cogitated.

The stable hand moved his way, wholly unconscious, while Rusty crowded back out of his path. On the fellow came, lantern swinging in his hand, passing not a yard from the hidden intruder.

Rusty stepped out behind him, deftly crashing the butt of his recently acquired pistol on the Mexican's cranium with one hand while he grabbed for the falling lantern with the other.

"I got only one thing to say, hombre," Rusty muttered as he dragged the unconscious man off to one side of the passageway where this impromptu meeting had taken place. "I'm sure hoping you're the lad that bent a six-gun on my head a couple days ago. If that's the case I'm satisfied to call it quits."

Carrying the lantern he started on a hunt for horseflesh, at once locating a number of substantial looking brutes. But Rusty eyed them with disfavor, for they were obviously work horses, quite unsuited for his purpose.

What he wanted was a lean, rangy cow pony, similar to the one he had been riding. His escape might easily result in a wild dash for the border, thirty or more miles north, and Rusty accordingly continued his search.

"This here Don Perenzo ought to keep some riding cayuses on tap in his stable," he reasoned. Then in sudden triumph: "They's a row of saddles! Must be something to use 'em on."

At the opposite side of the barn from that Rusty had entered, he found a corral, in which he perceived the shadowy forms of a dozen or more horses. From one of the saddles he took a coiled lariat.

"I've got to do this blind, sort of," Rusty muttered. "Hope I draw a likely cayuse."

Selecting an animal at random he roped it, leading his captive into the stable to be saddled. By the lantern light it proved to be reasonably satisfactory as horses went. All the spare saddles he made temporarily useless by cutting the latigos.

A little further exploration disclosed a gate to the corral, and Rusty rode out through this, thoughtfully leaving it wide open.

"Mebbe they'll be wanting saddle horses in a hurry later on," he thought. "I don't think these here brutes 'll be available; not very long, anyway. Strikes me I got the opposition pretty well coppered now."

Rusty headed for the little grove, though

hardly expecting to find Rosita there; nor was she.

"That being the case, I'll have to go after her, looks like," he thought. "I sure ain't intending to ride alone to-night."

The cluster of trees seemed to offer a safe place of concealment for the horse, and so Rusty left it there, starting for the hacienda on foot.

"Everything's been easy so far," he cogitated. "What comes now ain't liable to be quite so soft."

Dubiously he worked around, wishing he knew the location of Rosita's room.

"This here's sure a hard nut to crack," he grunted, "but I got to shake a leg. Time ain't so plenty as it might be," for Rusty was fully aware that his escape from the improvised jail might be discovered at any instant.

"My best bet," he decided, "is to hop some stray woman and make her take me to Rosita."

He made his entrance around at the side which instinct told him would probably contain the servants' quarters. Lights were not plentiful, and Rusty gingerly proceeded, feeling his way along what seemed to be a sort of hall, bordered by rooms that might or might not be occupied.

Rusty was quite curious regarding this fact, but decided to forego investigation.

The hall terminated in a storeroom, judging from the miscellaneous odds and ends Rusty's groping fingers encountered.

"Shucks!" he grumbled in disgust. "I'm way off the trail—in a regular blind cañon. I got to go back and tackle it again."

He retraced his way along the hall previously followed, and presently, casting off to the left at a venture, found himself outdoors, having gained the patio, or inner courtyard, which the hacienda surrounded on all sides like a huge square. Across the patio several rooms appeared quite brilliantly lighted, and Rusty concluded to see what could be seen.

The first room which his exploring gaze investigated proved empty, and he was on the point of moving on to another when a door opened and a girl entered—perhaps two or three years older than Rosita. The richness and taste of this young woman's dress—together with the air of self-assurance that she displayed—proclaimed her far above the servant type.

"Now, who the devil might that be?" Rusty grumbled. "She ain't what I want. That's plain enough."

There was about this girl a slight superficial resemblance to Rosita, suggestive of relationship.

"Mebby she's a sister of Rosita's," he mused, "or a cousin, or something. Might be she'd be glad to help me, and then again she might give the whole game away. I don't dast tackle her, durn the luck!"

She seemed to be searching for something.

"Josefa!"

"Sí, señorita!" came prompt answer from an adjoining room, and a second girl, clearly of lowly rank, entered.

"My book I was reading this afternoon—have you seen it?"

"No, señorita. But it may be under the tree in the patio."

"Look and see," was the imperious command. "If you find the book, bring it to my room."

Much to Rusty's gratification, the aristocratic damsel did not wait to learn the result of this search. She left the room by an inner door even as Josefa stepped out into the courtyard.

Rusty blocked her way, his big pistol carelessly in evidence.

"Don't scream, *muchacha!*" he hissed savagely. Spanish, of course.

The girl gazed silently at him, spellbound with fear and surprise at his sudden appearance.

"Do you know where Señorita Rosita is?" he demanded.

She opened her lips, but no words came forth—nothing but chattering of teeth.

Impatiently Rusty repeated his question. "I'm not going to hurt you," he added, "as long as you behave. But I've got to find the señorita. Where is she?"

"In her room."

"Alone?"

"No. With her aunt, Señora Perenzo, and her father, Don Eugenio."

"No wonder she couldn't get away, poor kid," Rusty thought. Then to the servant

girl: "Take me there. Quickly—you understand. And take care that we meet no one on the way—or—"

His pistol pressed meaningly against her ribs.

"You are the señor who killed Don Enrique?" she asked.

"I'm the guy," Rusty curtly informed her. "Let's go."

"Gladly will I aid you, señor. This Don Enrique—I hate him."

"Popular sort of cuss, Henry," was Rusty's grim thought. "Everybody speaks so well of him."

He put up his pistol, but as a measure of precaution kept a grasp on the servant's dress. At this time he trusted no one save himself.

"Lead on, *muchacha*. No harm will come to you."

"Yes, but we must be very quiet, señor. Come with me."

"I get you," Rusty whispered.

His guide conducted him across the patio to a portion of the hacienda at some little distance from their starting point. As they entered the building the maid placed a finger on her lips, a totally needless warning for quiet.

Through the dark she led him, Rusty managing to gather no more than a vague notion of their course. At length they emerged on a lighted hall; before a certain door the girl stopped.

"Señorita Rosita is within," she whispered.

Rusty listened closely; the murmur of voices reached his ears, and the sound of sobs. His fingers closed on the knob, slowly turning it; the door proved to be unlocked, and suddenly he flung it wide open, striding into the room.

Three persons were there—Rosita, her father, and an elderly woman who filled Rosita's description well enough to be Tia Maria. Evidently a stormy session had been in progress.

Don Eugenio exploded with a sharp sputter of exclamations like pistol shots.

"You!" he gasped. "What business of hell is this?"

Rosita sprang up with a glad little cry, and an instant later was in Rusty's arms.

"Oh, my Rus-tee!" she sobbed happily. "I should have known you would not fail to come."

"I couldn't leave without you, Rosita," he whispered. "But we've got to show speed. This the only door to your room?"

Breathlessly she nodded.

"I ought to lock 'em up," and he indicated her father and aunt. "Where's the key?"

Tia Maria had almost collapsed. Evidently the least she expected from this desperate Americano was instant death.

"The key—eet ees in my father's pocket. You weel not hurt heem, Rus-tee!" Rosita pleaded. "He has been so cruel and heartless to me, but he ees yet my father."

"I wouldn't touch a hair of his head, Rosita," he told her softly. "All I want of him now is that key."

He got it from Perenzo's plump person, his demand backed by a display of the big six-shooter.

"You are going with this common cowboy—this rider from the cattle ranges?" Perenzo demanded of his daughter.

"Yes, my father," she murmured. "I cannot help it; I love him."

"You are then no child of mine!" and Don Eugenio spat forth the words venomously. "I cast you off! Not one peso of my fortune shall be yours—no, not were it to save you from death by starvation!"

"Now, I'm sorry to hear that," said Rusty, with a glint of sardonic humor in his eyes. "But I don't reckon Rosita 'll miss your money. You been figuring I was a range rider. Well, I am, but I'm also the son of old Dan Towers, north of the line. He's put a hundred thousand dollars in a bank for the girl I marry. Guess she won't have to wash the dishes and cook meals."

"Believe him not, Rosita! He lies!"

"Adios, father-in-law!" called Rusty, and he shut and locked the door.

"Quick!" he said to Rosita. "Get us away from here. I've got a horse waiting."

A howl of rage burst from within, accompanied by the shrill treble of Tia Maria, who had at last found her voice and was using it vigorously.

In less than a minute they were outdoors, under the friendly glow of the low-hanging stars. Hand in hand, just as two nights previous, they ran through the trees and bushes that clustered about the hacienda; this time fate did not play them false, for the horse was still where Rusty had left it.

Briskly he swung to the saddle; then bent over, lifting up Rosita, who nestled comfortably in his strong arms. He urged the pony forward.

"We must make haste, my Rus-tee," she whispered fearfully. "Yet may my father's riders catch us!"

"Were all the spare horses in the corral back of the big barn?" he asked.

"Yes, Rus-tee."

"Then I guess we don't have to worry. I turned 'em loose when I collected this cayuse we're riding. Also I put a dozen or so of saddles I found in the barn out of business."

"Never weel I recover from the wonder I feel at you, my Rus-tee. You think of everything. And so you are not a poor cowboy, but the son of that reech man, Señor Towers! Rus-tee, never, never, would I have imagined that!"

"You aren't sorry to hear that, are you, Rosita?"

"No," she confessed, "for eet ees true what my father said that night. Always do I like pretty clothes, Rus-tee, theengs that cost much money. But"—her voice sank to a murmur, so soft that Rusty bent over in order not to miss it—"for you would I gladly give up them all. Thinking you poor, I loved you, Rus-tee; knowing you are not poor, I could not love you more. That is impossible."

"And will you always love me?" he whispered. "Rose of Mexico?"

"Yes," was her soft answer, "always weel I love you, my Rus-tee—always; forever and forever."

And as the horse carried them swiftly northward the softly twinkling stars seemed to smile down in a tender benediction.

THE END

TREK

LONG road or sea lane,
Gray gull or white,
Dreams that go winging
Into the night.

Ages-old urging
On us again,
Song of the surging
Mother of men.

Pull up the stakes, boys,
Wind in the dawn
Stirring the covert
Itch to be gone.

Long road or sea lane,
Take which you will,
Romance is waiting
Over the hill!

E. Leslie Spaulding.

War Spawn

By MAY WILMOTH

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PART I

IN the spring of 1917, an old river pirate named Peter Reading in a drunken frenzy knocks down his fine-spirited daughter, Judith. While she is unconscious Jerry the Rat murders Old Peter for his money. When Judith comes to, Jerry blames the killing on her. She flees, and stows herself away on the yacht of young Stephen Fenwick, which she knows is to sail that night for Brazil with its young master. The first day out Judith is discovered. As Stephen is planning to give her his sister's suite to live in, the captain comes down the deck looking extremely disturbed; the wireless of the Psyche has just picked up the news that the United States has declared the existence of a state of war!

CHAPTER VI.

THE STOWAWAY.

THE first excitement caused on the yacht by the news of the declaration of war settled down during luncheon to a discussion between the doctor and Stephen of wars ancient and modern, and to speculation as to whether great nations could be built without a foundation laid by war.

Later, while the good ship Psyche flew steadily onward through dreaming placid waters, they became buried in the intricacies of a well-fought game of chess, and forgot that there was a war! But the captain and all the crew had renewed their vigilance.

After an hour Captain Lang interrupted the game with apologies.

"About the girl," he said, standing at Stephen's elbow and looking over the chessboard, "she's still in my cabin."

Stephen glanced up, and regarded the captain rather vaguely, his mind still concentrated upon his next move.

"The girl?" he asked. "Oh, you mean the little stowaway. Move her into my sister's suite. The doctor and I attended to her wardrobe."

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for November 27.

"Her wardrobe?" questioned Captain Lang, mystified.

"Yes. We had an idea that she might not have had her luggage sent on board. On the chance that my sister may not have left any clothing in there, we selected some things from our own that may prove more or less useful."

He and the doctor exchanged laughing glances. They each had a vision of the young stowaway walking the deck of the Psyche clad in the doctor's white duck uniform.

"What's to become of her when we get to Brazil?" worried the skipper.

"We'll call her the daughter of Psyche, which is a mythological compliment that she doesn't deserve, since the doctor says she is ugly. Then we'll place her in some kindergarten, and each of us take a fatherly interest in her. She's just as good material as a Belgian orphan. My sister has taken several of them."

The captain laughed in spite of his thwarted wish for a serious discussion.

"I guess she's past the kindergarten age."

"Oh, well, perhaps she has some plans of her own that we can help her to carry out. The fair sex usually do have plans."

Stephen grinned naïvely.

"Perhaps she's a spy," contributed the doctor, as he lighted a cigar. "Or she may have committed some crime, and is fleeing from justice."

"Your experience in France has evidently succeeded in making you morbid," scoffed Stephen.

"Oh, perhaps it is the influence of the sea. There is something about the sea that lends wings to one's imagination."

The captain had vanished long before this, despairing of getting any serious discussion out of either of them. A few minutes later he bent over Judith, who was just waking from her long sleep.

"Awake, are you?" he queried kindly. "You are to be moved to more comfortable quarters soon."

He crossed the room, and returned with a bowl of broth, which he held for her as she drank it.

"You lie here now and I'll be back in a few minutes," he told her, and went out.

Judith felt her bandaged head, took general stock of herself for a moment, and discovered quite to her surprise that she felt little the worse for her night of wakefulness and its attendant emotional strain.

She glanced around. The captain's suite was a snug place done in brown leather and weathered oak. Through the wide-flung portholes she caught a glimpse of blue sea. The sun was shining upon it, and the ruddy reflection danced in the little wavelets upon the dull polished wood of the walls and ceiling. She could hear the subdued purr of the engines.

She settled back among the pillows with a feeling of almost happiness, at least of present content. The rhythmic velvety purr of the engines seemed whispering to her that with each revolution of the wheels she was being carried farther and farther from the old life, and the things she abhorred.

A shudder traversed her body as she wondered if the police had found old Peter yet, and if they had accused her of the murder.

The police and the river folk knew that she and the old man were always at swords' points; he would be found dead, she would have vanished; there would be a definite case of circumstantial evidence against her.

Judith had arrived at this point in her mental journey when Captain Lang returned. He was startled by the brilliancy of her eyes, the color in her cheeks. She was going to have a fever as sure as fate, he told himself.

"Can you walk all right?" he asked, bending over her solicitously.

Judith was not sure. She sat up. She felt a trifle giddy, but she pushed away the blanket and rose to her feet.

"Need some help?" asked the captain.

"No."

She shook her bandaged head slowly as she took a few unsteady steps. Then, as she became accustomed to the gentle motion of the craft she stood firmly, a tall, slender, grotesque figure, in the center of the cabin.

"You seem to be all right," encouraged the captain kindly. "Come with me now."

Judith followed slowly the short, stout

figure of the skipper through the door, and down the long corridor. Everything seemed unreal to her, and she felt as if she were walking upon air.

She passed open doors that revealed enchanting glimpses of beautiful salons, a library, the suite Stephen was occupying; luxury such as she had never dreamed of even in her most opulent moments.

This feeling grew as the captain flung wide a door and bade her enter.

"Here you are!" he said cheerily. "Now make yourself comfortable. Here is a bell. If you need anything you don't find, ring it. And there is the telephone."

He thrust a key into the girl's hand and vanished. Judith stood in the center of the room and stared bewilderedly about her, the key grasped tightly in her hand.

The captain stopped upon the other side of the closed door, and gazed at it for a moment somewhat fretfully. Having a young girl on board his ship vastly complicated the business of navigation, he felt, and there were enough things for him to worry about without having more anxiety thrust upon him. He felt distinctly peevish. He wished that she were safely upon land.

The added reflection, as he returned to his cabin, that she had not appeared to be especially safe upon land, comforted the fatherly old captain considerably; and as he poured himself a modest drink from the bottle he had taken from the convenient cellarette he was further reassured by another thought.

"Thank Heaven, she doesn't happen to be pretty!" he said as he raised his glass.

In the stateroom where the captain had left her, beginning to study her environment, Judith, waking from her trance, was concentrating upon her relation to it.

The apartment had been designed by a firm of famous interior decorators. There was a clever mingling of white, pale blue, and warm rose-pink, with touches of black here and there to lend character to the dainty colors.

There were myriad mirrors arranged artfully, that the fair occupant of the suite might view herself from every angle. These same mirrors had never been required before to perform so cruel an office. Dilated, horrified eyes gazed into them at the figure reflected there.

Its hair hung in straight strings far below the waist. The head was tied in a bandage. An old gingham dress, none the fresher for having been slept in, hung dejectedly about the slender limbs. The westering sun pouring in at the open port holes cruelly illumined it.

Judith dragged herself over to one of the mirrors to make sure that she saw aright. She peered intently into its depths. When she was fully convinced that the weird reflection was really her own she breathed a dry sob of utter disgust.

The ultimate in sulphuric comparison leaped to her mind. She breathed it fiercely, her face close to the mirrored one:

"You look like hell!"

Then she dropped upon the soft blue carpet and buried her face in her hands. A wave of black despair rushed over her. She endeavored to push it back, but on it came engulfing her utterly.

She was brought face to face with the terrible contrasts of life. How could she ever hope to rid herself of the taint of her birth, her environment?

There seemed no foundation for a belief to which she had consistently clung, that somehow her life was going to emerge flowerlike from the dark ooze of her environment, blossoming with all the ideals, enthusiasms, and beauty engendered in her mind as she had watched the stately bridge develop.

She raised her face from her hands. It was pale and drawn and quivering with sudden resolve.

She had determined to seek rest from these dark memories this horrible realization, this utter despair, in the kindly bosom of old ocean.

Judith rose from the carpet where she had crouched. She started toward the door. Just then a knock sounded, followed by a slight scraping sound. A piece of paper was being slowly thrust under the door of her room.

Judith picked up the piece of paper. It is even by such slight means that fate diverts the course of a human destiny. She

unfolded it, and read, written in a dashing hand:

DEAR MISS STOWAWAY:

Please consider the stateroom and everything it contains at your disposal. If you will open the door you will find your lunch. I trust that you will enjoy it, and that you will find something that will take the place of the clothing you undoubtedly, in the hurry of your preparations, forgot to bring with you.

Sincerely,
STEPHEN FENWICK, JR.

Judith had eaten nothing but two bowls of broth since noon the previous day. Nature, for her own purposes, has formulated a law which is stronger than any other law, when there is no question of a duty to another involved—the law of self-preservation.

One sentence, in spite of Judith's very recent longing for death, stood out boldly from the rest of the note: "If you will open the door you will find your lunch." Judith opened the door. There on a little table stood a tray covered over with a fine white linen napkin. She raised a corner of the cloth. A tempting odor rose to her nostrils. Her healthy young body fairly screamed for the food. Self-destruction could be postponed for a time.

Judith grasped her "life saver" in both hands and carried it to a table under one of the open portholes. Then, in spite of her desire for the food, she rushed to find a place to wash her hands. She found it in a bewildering bathroom, which she did not take the time to admire. After a moment's awkward manipulation of the silvered faucets she bathed her hands and returned hurriedly to the tray.

She hesitated to sit upon any of the delicately upholstered chairs. Instead she sat down upon the carpet, tailor fashion, and rested the tray on her knees. Greedily she attacked the roasted chicken, the snowy bread, the creamed potatoes, the currant jelly, the coffee with thick cream, of which she managed to spill a portion during her juggling feat of balancing the tray on her knees.

There was a portion of apple pie which she tasted now and then during her gustatory revel. She had never eaten anything like this food. If she could fare sumptuously like this every day, perhaps after all life might be worth going on with!

Judith was young. And while she had just passed through a grueling experience, she was possessed with the elasticity of spirits which belong by divine right to youth. She was rested, fed; every occurrence seemed to point toward the fact that she was among friends.

What more natural than that the rebound should come; that she should find herself curious about these new friends who appeared to be taking so much trouble for a rat of a stowaway?

She spread the napkin over the bare bones of the chicken, and, rising, placed the tray on the table. Then she recovered the note, which in her excitement about the prospect of food she had dropped upon the floor.

She read it over again. A brain cell where had been imprisoned Judith's sense of humor opened and permitted a little grinning imp to escape for a moment and kiss her red lips into a smile. The whole tenor of the note was one of gayety. She wondered what sort of person Stephen Fenwick, Jr., might happen to be.

But the grinning little imp flew back to the prison, and Judith did not pursue her train of thought further. He was the son of "Big" Fenwick, a man who was many times a millionaire, so Pat O'Halloran had told her.

He was so far removed from her habitual orbit of thought that she could not make him seem real. Pat had said that he was sailing for Brazil. She had forgotten all about that bit of information until the note had come. She had only seen in the Psyche a means of escape from the horror of murder.

When she had watched the craft from the bridge it had seemed to her like an enchanted thing. And so it was proving. It was evoking friends for her. It was carrying her swiftly away from the old life. Hope awoke again in Judith's breast like a beautiful white flower. She would think no more dark thoughts of self-destruction, but with the materials which were being thrown into her hands she would slowly,

painstakingly—just as the builders had built the bridge—begin to build her new life.

So in the space of half an hour Judith had run the gamut from despair to hope. So it happens that Tragedy holds the hand of Comedy at times, and perhaps gains courage from the contact.

The note had told her to consider the stateroom and its contents at her disposal. With her new resolve to take what materials that fell to her hand in the building of her new life she resolved to go on a voyage of discovery and find what there was for her.

She reread the note. Then for the first time during the strenuous hours just passed great tears gathered in her beautiful eyes and dropped upon the note. The soft, womanly part of her nature had been reached by kindness. The occasion seemed to justify this exhibition of emotion. Judith had known so little kindness during her nineteen years!

Before she started on her voyage of discovery it seemed fitting to Judith that she should make preparations for the journey. She dried her tears and sat down on the carpet and removed her shoes and stockings. These she made into a parcel. The open porthole invited. She threw the bundle into the sea.

Then utter recklessness possessed her. She unbuttoned her soiled gingham dress. This slipped to the floor, and she stepped out of it, feeling, somehow, that she was discarding, bit by bit, all vestige of the old life.

Resolutely she bound the rest of her clothes into a tight parcel, and tossed them through the porthole to join the shoes and stockings.

Then she removed the bandage from her forehead, leaving only the adhesive tape to hold the cut together. She bound up her hair into a great rope around her head.

A moment later she stood in the bathroom designed for Ivy Fenwick, with the delightfully scented soap in the silver soap dish, and the water that poured hot and cold streams into the big, fluted, white conch-shell bathtub, pink lined and satiny finished.

Through the portholes came delicious, invigorating whiffs of sea air. Judith slid into the water with a little sigh of satisfaction.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MOONLIGHT SONATA.

ON deck several hours later Stephen was tramping restlessly up and down, his hands clasped behind his back, his eyes fixed upon the floor. Dinner was over. He and the doctor had played interminable games of shuffleboard. It seemed to him the day would never end.

The doctor, sitting back in a steamer chair with his feet elevated, was contentedly smoking and watching the glories of their first sunset out. He considered himself a lucky dog to have fallen into so fine a berth just when he was almost down and out from his wound.

Through the swirl of smoke from his cigar he watched the changing of the rose of the horizon to opalescent tints of sapphire, violet, yellow, deepening to crimson at the edge where the sky met the sea. The Psyche seemed sailing in a rainbow as the colors were reflected in the waters.

Stephen was not watching the nature-painted seascape, though he had been known in times past to climb high mountain peaks for the sake of viewing a sunset or a sunrise. He continued to pace restlessly up and down.

"I think I'd better go below and see how my young patient is progressing," said the doctor at last, tossing the glowing end of his cigar into the sea. The sun had now definitely departed, leaving a delicate memory in its afterglow.

"Good idea, old man." Stephen paused in his pacing and laid a large, well-shaped hand upon the doctor's shoulder. "I wrote a note and tucked it under her door after Owonto took her lunch to her. It just occurs to me that perhaps she can't read."

"Oh, she doubtless can!" rejoined the doctor. "American kids usually have a smattering of education."

"How old is she, fourteen or fifteen?" asked Stephen idly.

"Oh, she is older than that; seventeen more likely."

"Well, tell the poor youngster that she doesn't have to remain alone down there all the evening. She's probably feeling pretty forlorn by now. No matter what sort of a dump she left, it had one advantage over the Psyche for her; it was at least familiar.

"Some grit to run away like that, eh? Make her understand that she is among friends. Doctors are natural father confessors for the fair sex; so she will undoubtedly sob out the sad story of her life upon your immaculate uniform."

The doctor laughed wryly. "I hope before she tries it she will have made free with soap and water. She'd managed to accumulate a lot of New York real estate."

"Well, tell her to climb into some of that comic opera scenery, and come into the salon. I'm going to hammer out a few notes on the piano. Music may make her forget how beastly lonely the Atlantic Ocean can be at night."

The doctor swung around and faced Stephen.

"Oh! Do you play the piano?" he asked, his voice smooth over an undercurrent of amused surprise, as he gazed at the bulky figure leaning at ease now against the railing. Virile, spiky-brown hair, heavy chin, large mouth just redeemed from ugliness by splendid rows of flashing white teeth, a powerful physique.

The man looked as if he were chafing to chip away the veneer of civilization and revert to primal things, and he spoke of playing the piano!

The doctor had been reared in a hard school, where the men struggled for the daily bread, and the women played the piano, if they happened to have one. His viewpoint of the arts was naturally colored by his early training.

Stephen was smiling at him. He knew almost what the doctor was thinking. He knew also that the point of view was narrow. So while the doctor was thinking Stephen trivial, he was being gauged as narrow.

Which did not hinder them in the least from mightily liking each other.

"Yes, I play the piano!" Stephen mimicked laughingly.

The doctor shook his head, gravely smiling as he turned away. He had forgotten that even in war music is as essential as the bread and the bullets.

Stephen stood beside the railing after the doctor's departure, vaguely sensible of the beauty of the delicate sunset afterglow. He hated to confess to himself that after all his "high thinking" of the previous night, he really was missing the gay life he had just left.

His lips tensed at the thought of the fight before him. Not one fight, and then victory, and the fruits of peace, but a battleground upon which, before he was through, would be strewn with as grim corpses as any the doctor had seen in France.

Suddenly he straightened, shrugged his broad shoulders, lighted a cigarette, and started for the salon, where there was a grand piano. Music, perhaps, would control his mood.

He almost ran into a seaman who was rolling up the rug preparatory to covering up the chairs.

"Isn't it a little early to dismantle the deck, Mr. Allerton?" asked Stephen of the mate who came up at that moment.

"I thought I heard you say you were going below," explained the mate.

That seemed strange to Stephen. He did not remember having seen the mate on deck.

"Yes," replied Stephen, endeavoring to conceal a slight irritation that always assailed him in the presence of Mate Allerton, "but I might come up again. The deck should be left habitable on these beautiful fair nights at least until ten o'clock."

The mate explained that he had thought that some of the ceremony which was kept up when the women of the family and their guests were taking a cruise could be dispensed with, now that Stephen was the only passenger on the yacht.

This seemed reasonable to Stephen, who was about to pass on with no further comment, when he happened to glance at the mate's face. His lips were curled in a veiled sneer that aroused all of Stephen's antagonism.

He glanced at him sharply.

"Leave things as they are!" he said curtly, and passed on. Allerton stood watching him after giving the order to the seaman, his head thrown back, an evil look spreading over his face that marred his fine features. His big figure tensed, and his hands clenched. At that moment he could have cheerfully thrown the son and heir of the house of Fenwick into the sea.

Stephen descended the broad staircase. He paused a moment in the hallway below, his eyes fixed upon the floor reflectively.

"That fellow always rubs me the wrong way; with all his good looks he certainly has the evil eye. I think one of these days the Psyche will have to worry along without him."

The salon that Stephen entered a moment later was beautifully finished, and furnished in dull mahogany. Beautiful rugs were upon the polished floor, great easy chairs and wide sofas stood invitingly about, a grand piano in one corner was open, music upon the rack. The faithful Owonto looked after all these minor details.

But Stephen needed no notes for his playing. He sat down, and dashed into a gay little French topical chanson, then another, breaking off in the middle to play a catchy popular air that he had heard in the cabarets at home during the winter.

But the music increased his loneliness, bringing back disturbing memories. He paused after a few minutes, and sat quietly, his eyes wandering to the open window that gave upon the tiny lower deck, through which the moonlight was now streaming.

Suddenly he turned back to the piano, and swung into the majestic chords of the first movement of the Moonlight Sonata.

Stephen played as he had never done before, pouring out all his pent-up longing for something better in life than merely wasting time.

Soon the music swelled in mighty majestic rhythm. The soft night air carried the harmonies out through the corridors of the swiftly moving Psyche. The men in the hold listened; the captain standing near the man at the wheel dropped his glasses, and gazed out over the moonlit waters, and then up into the superb galaxy of stars.

In the meantime the doctor had tapped at the door of the stateroom where the stowaway had been moved a few hours previously. There was a slight scraping sound as a key was turned in the lock, and then Dr. Gordon was treated to one of the real surprises of his not uneventful career, as the door was slowly opened a little way.

A tall figure stood in the aperture, her hand upon the doorknob, surveying him inquiringly. A splendid aureole of tawny hair surmounted a face delicately oval though colorless, save for scarlet lips slightly parted showing even rows of small white teeth.

The eyes, steady, inquiring eyes, gazed into his. The figure, tall, slender, rounded, was attired in a pink, silk negligee.

Judith noticed his bewilderment. "Ye ain't made no mistake," she said. "I'm the stowaway, all right!" He stepped toward her, and looked at her keenly. "I don't wonder ye hardly know me," she said gravely.

The doctor crossed the threshold with all the nonchalance he could muster, still dazedly staring at this wonderful butterfly that had changed so suddenly from a grub.

Judith, who had been all grace in the clothing to which she was accustomed, stumbled awkwardly over her trailing negligee as she backed away from the door. She had found this wonderful pink silk confection, after her bath and shampoo, hanging with an indiscriminate array of other clothing in the wardrobe behind one of the mirrored doors.

Further investigation in the drawers of the gay, rose-garlanded dresser had revealed little piles of clean, perfumed, silken underwear, sans ribbons, buttons, and also somewhat worn, too worn for Ivy Fenwick's maid to think them worth packing for going ashore, but which to Judith were the loveliest lingerie ever.

She had experienced a soft delight in the feel of the delicate silk against her flesh; she had never known before the exquisite pleasure of the simple contact of delicate fabrics. But she had found no shoes. So it was a bare-footed Judith that tripped over the trailing silken lengths of her gown.

"Be careful," cautioned the doctor, extending a restraining hand. But Judith's bare toe had caught in the lace, and to her horror it was being torn from the fabric, and great pieces of silk with it.

She clung desperately to the doctor's arm and, leaning over, extricated her foot from the entanglement. The sight of a cunning arrangement of pink toes was Dr. Gordon's reward for gallantry.

"Oh, it's all torn," she cried, lifting dismayed eyes to the doctor's ugly face, which in spite of himself wore now a broad grin.

"What ye laughin' at?" asked Judith brusquely.

"I beg your pardon, I am not laughing."

The doctor's face was grave enough now, as Judith looked at him. "I must examine the wound I dressed this morning," he said, thinking to divert her mind from his amusement by the suddenness with which he changed the subject. "That is, if you think you can get along without my arm."

Judith's hands dropped from his arm as if they had been burned by the contact.

"I—I—" she stammered. But the doctor was at the other side of the room, and had secured a small chair which he placed under the light.

"Sit down there," he said.

Judith dropped into the chair, her face burning. She wondered which was the worst, to be laughed at, or harassed as Jerry used to tease her.

"You shouldn't have removed the bandage before I permitted you to," criticized the doctor in his most gravely professional manner as he pushed back the masses of hair from her forehead.

"It's all right; it don't hurt any," she said easily.

Censure put Judith on the defensive, consequently at her ease. She was accustomed to defensive warfare.

The adhesive tape was still in place, the doctor found as he examined the dressing with fingers that trembled slightly. The doctor's discovery of so much beauty in an unexpected place had slightly unnerved him, combined with the last shock as of electricity when his hands came in contact with the girl's wonderful hair.

Suddenly there rang through the room the gay, rippling notes of a piano. The girl vibrated to the sound, her little bare feet beating time upon the velvety carpet.

"How did you get this wound?" asked the doctor as he stood erect, and gazed down at her.

The girl shook her head. Her hair tumbled again over her forehead.

"Would you care to tell me how you came to be on board the Psyche?" he further questioned.

"No!" laconically imparted Judith.

The doctor could scarcely repress a smile as he remembered that Stephen had expected the girl to weep upon his bosom, and unburden herself.

"Mr. Fenwick thought you might!" gently urged Fenwick's emissary.

"No. I ain't going to tell nothing to nobody," said the girl firmly.

"Mr. Fenwick wished me to say that you need not feel that you must remain down here all the evening. Wouldn't you like to go up on deck?"

"No. I'll go to bed," said Judith quietly. Secretly she was overwhelmed by so much polite consideration. She was even forgiving the physician for laughing at her.

"Good night," he said, opening the door just as the first strains of the Moonlight Sonata floated majestically through the corridors.

The doctor paused for a moment outside her door. The tingle of his contact with the girl's hair lingered—a bewildering memory. His affairs of the heart had been few and simple, narrowed down now to the one girl who was waiting for him.

But this had been a different experience. Judith was fashioned upon the same lines as the famous sirens of history, with this difference; Judith was unconscious of her physical attraction.

He reached the door of the salon, entered, and found an easy-chair. His head was whirling; he wanted to sit quietly and think. The music tripped gayly in the second movement; it progressed unhaltingly until nearly the end, when there came a crash that brought the doctor upright in his seat.

Stephen had leaped to his feet, rushed

across the floor, and through the door which opened upon the tiny lower deck.

By the light of the moon he had seen through the salon window a figure standing upon the deck that made him think he was seeing the "Goddess of the Bridge."

With a weird feeling that he was being haunted, he ran toward the tall figure standing there. He had no sort of idea that he was going to meet reality when he put out his hand.

"I suppose you just slid down here on a moonbeam, but I'm going to make sure that you don't climb back again!" he cried firmly, as he felt in his grasp a real flesh and blood arm.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FIGHTER.

"LEGGO my arm!" commanded Judith imperiously, and quite characteristically.

Stephen's grasp perceptibly tightened.

"Promise me you won't vanish up that moonbeam, and I will!" he agreed.

"You talk like a story book," said Judith amazed. "I ain't goin' to go away on no moonbeam! Where'd you get that stuff?"

Stephen was so fascinated by the girl's beauty that he did not mind her grotesque language in the least.

His goddess was sailing away with him to Pernambuco, the girl he had been dreaming about!

Romance had followed him!

"Who are you? How did you get here? Where are you going? The questions tumbled out as he surveyed her, fearful even yet that she was a figment of his rather riotous imagination.

"I'm the stowaway, I'm goin' to Brazil, and I ain't goin' to tell you how I got here!" There was defiance in Judith's voice.

Stephen surveyed her incredulously. "You can't be the stowaway. I saw her. She's quite a different sort of person."

"It's the clothes!" explained Judith out of the depths of her feminine wisdom. "Clothes make a lot of difference. Who are you?" she asked, curiosity vibrating in her voice.

She had not recognized in this somewhat ugly young man the prince about whom she had woven her dreams as she stood on the bridge. She felt a distinct shock of disappointment.

The son of a millionaire ought to be handsome. Besides, he had looked handsome from her distant viewpoint. Even the moonlight failed to soften his rugged features into anything resembling what she had dreamed. But her disappointment lasted only for an instant. There came to her the memory of his letter, his kindness routing all her disappointment.

She stepped closer, and looked up into his face with lovely eloquent eyes.

"Stephen Fenwick, very much at your service!" he said, bowing low.

"Oh!" cried the girl, drawing back. "I ain't goin' to try to thank you for bein' so good to me. Maybe you know?"

Then for some reason Judith was attacked by a fit of shyness. She drew back into the shadow of the overhanging deck.

"I must be goin' now," she said hurriedly. "You see, I heard the music, and I couldn't stay away."

"You like music?" asked Stephen divertingly.

"Oh! I love it!" Emerging from the shadow, she clasped her hands impulsively together upon the railing, and gazed out over the moonlit water, her sudden attack of shyness momentarily in abeyance. "But I ain't never heard music like that. Somehow it seemed all moonshine, just like the night!" she cried.

Stephen stared. The girl had imagination, though she did clothe her thoughts raggedly.

With a little sigh she turned away from the railing. "I'll go now," she said simply.

"Don't go," pleaded Stephen, eagerly bending toward her. "I'm terribly lonely. The Atlantic Ocean certainly isn't the most lively place in the world at night. Come up on deck with me. You might like to walk."

Again Judith was attacked by the feeling of shyness. An explanation was due this very kind young man; she must tell

him her reason for not accepting his invitation. The zest for life and adventure was also throbbing in her veins.

She would like to go up on deck, and watch the moon with an agreeable young man rather than to return to her lonely, though beautiful stateroom. But the sad news must be imparted.

"I—I couldn't find any shoes," she explained gravely, falteringly.

Stephen smiled, though there was concern in his voice, as involuntarily he glanced down at her feet, concealed by the soft folds of her gown.

"What are you wearing, may I ask?"

"Just—just my feet!" confessed Judith stammeringly.

"Good Lord," cried Stephen. "We forgot that important item. I have some Japanese slippers that perhaps will fit you. Come into the salon, and wait while I go and look them up!"

"I'm a lot of bother," said Judith slowly.

Wonderingly she raised her face to his. More kindness had been lavished upon her during her short stay upon the Psyche than in all the combined years of her life, except for the good-natured gifts of old "Baldy" Sowers.

"No trouble at all," reassured Stephen. "Come."

Judith stepped across the threshold, her bare feet sinking into the soft rug. She shivered a trifle. Though the night was warm her diaphanous draperies were inadequate protection.

Stephen noticed. "I'll bring you a coat, too," he promised. "Sit here, and I'll be back directly."

Fenwick departed, his brain a whirl of conflicting emotions. To have started out upon a perfectly prosaic mission to his father's sugar plantations in South America, and then to suddenly find himself in the midst of highly exciting romance was bewildering.

This girl appealed to him more than any one he had ever seen in all his adventurings into the realm of the tender passion. She was delicious, beautiful, different; pathetically unspoiled, ignorant, too, but with infinite possibilities.

Her defiant announcement that she proposed to keep her own counsel amused him. She must have had a terrible experience. Stephen felt a desire to make her life from now on easy and beautiful. It never occurred to him that the girl might object.

Judith sank back as Stephen left her, into the depth of a luxurious easy-chair. She was lost in admiration of the beautiful room, when a voice sounded at her elbow.

Mate Allerton was gazing down at her, his handsome face vastly intrigued.

"You went to a lot of trouble to 'hook' him, didn't you?" he queried cheerily.

"What?" Judith's incomprehension was complete. She surveyed him in her turn with much curiosity, femininely susceptible to manly good looks.

Allerton nodded his head toward the door through which Stephen had disappeared.

"It was staged pretty well. Calculated to arouse sympathy, eh? I certainly admire your histrionic ability. It's strange I never happened to see you on the stage. What show were you with? Luck must have been rotten to drive you to this."

Judith gazed with round eyes of wonder at the man who was smiling down at her like a handsome young satyr. She was figuratively as well as literally at sea.

"What show?" she queried.

The mate leaned over, and placed his hand familiarly upon her shoulder. There was something in the touch that made Judith shrink as she had always shrunk from Jerry.

"You are a fine little pretender!" he said, leaning over so that she could feel his breath hot upon her face.

"I dunno what you're talkin' about!" she exclaimed angrily.

Allerton laughed outright. "Trying the ingenue rôle, are you?" he paused and surveyed the girl's stormy flushed face, her beautiful, upturned angry eyes. "But you'd do better in the 'vamp' parts!"

Judith rose from the luxurious chair. Comprehension had at last come to her. Silence and flight, as usual, were her only weapons. She started toward the door through which she had just entered the salon. The mate's firm hand upon her shoulder brought her to pause.

"Don't go yet," he mocked. "You may be fishing for bigger game, but won't you let the smaller fish wriggle around in your net a little while?"

Judith writhed away from the detaining hand, and with an inner sigh of relief saw Stephen hurrying across the salon. The light of anger was burning in his eyes. He dropped the articles he was carrying, and taking hold of the mate's arm, jostled him back against the wall.

"Why are you presuming to detain this young lady?" he asked evenly.

Allerton held himself rigid, his hands clenched, as he replied, "I presumed to detain her because I felt so disposed. What are you going to do about it?" he asked insolently, self-interest forgotten in the desire to feel the thick throat of his employer's son under the grasp of his strong fingers.

He had watched Beverly Randolph's infatuation for Stephen with hate in his heart. He had loved her, but there was one person whom he loved more, and that person was his handsome self. He had worked hard for his berth on the Psyche, so he had held his peace.

But now, in the accession of murderous rage which possessed him, he threw caution to the winds. Into the eyes of each sprang the primitive lust of conquest.

"This girl has taken refuge upon the Psyche from some presumably horrible fate, and is entitled to the chivalrous protection of every man on board. Since you do not seem inclined to act decently, I'm afraid I'll have to make you."

The mate and Stephen stripped off their coats simultaneously.

"When did you turn into a Sir Galahad?" sneered the mate as he threw his coat into a chair. "If this girl who is looking to you for protection knew your reputation, she would feel about as safe with you as she would in the track of a simoon."

Stephen turned to Judith who still stood beside the door, her eyes kindled also with the battle-light. Cross Allerton had roused in her all her passionate hatred of the male. She hated them both as they stood there. She was in every respect as primal as they for the moment.

"Look at me!" said Stephen. "You don't believe him, do you?"

Judith drew herself up to her slim height and, with her eyes on a level with Stephen's, seemed to search his very soul. What she saw satisfied her apparently.

"No, I don't," she replied slowly.

"You better go to your stateroom now," advised Stephen.

Judith shook her tawny head, "No, I ain't goin' away."

Stephen whirled, and faced the mate. He found him ready, a foeman worthy of his very best steel. Allerton was tall, broad-shouldered, slender of waist and lean of flank, and he towered above Stephen with a great superiority of reach. He moved lithely on his toes as they sparred and circled for an opening.

But Allerton was pitted against the bull-dog type of fighter, grim and steady. Stephen's head was sunk between his shoulders. He was not so quick in his movements as Allerton, but the mate knew and respected Fenwick's sort. He took no chances with them, but cut them to pieces at long range.

Suddenly the mate's long left shot out, crashing against Stephen's mouth with such force as to snap his head back. Fenwick's vicious counter whizzed harmlessly past the mate's ear. He sidestepped, and whipped another blow into Stephen's neck.

Judith hardly breathed as she saw the blood trickling from Fenwick's split lip. His face was a mask of unconcern however, save for his eyes, where two fires glared out at his opponent. Had it not been for his eyes Judith would have feared that the other was going to gain the victory.

Lowering his head he rushed Allerton, endeavoring to close in preparatory to delivering short arm jolts to the body, which he had always found were deadly. But with superb defense Allerton recoiled, whipping in deadly counters, bringing more blood from Stephen's swelling face.

Dismayed, Judith waited. She feared now, definitely, that her champion had met more than his match, his conqueror.

Then as they reeled snarling into a new clinch, she was again reassured. Fenwick had succeeded in delivering a blow below

the heart that sent the mate staggering against the table, which overturned and crashed to the floor.

Allerton gasped audibly, and paled, then recovered, and rushed at the son of his employer with a growl of rage.

Standing in the doorway, several seamen had come to watch the fight with all appearances of ghoulish glee.

"What are they fighting about?" questioned a voice that reached Judith quite plainly.

"A skoit, of course," sibilantly whispered a seaman in good water-front vernacular.

"Didn't know there was one on board," came the reply.

Judith stepped swiftly across the threshold, and gained the deck. She could not leave, however, while the fate of Fenwick was in doubt. She knew that this was a fight to a finish, but she prayed that the handsome beast who had kissed her might be the one that got "finished."

She peered into the window through which Fenwick had spied her a few minutes prior; that seemed now like hours to the girl.

There was a fierce renewal of the fight. They reeled, and crashed, and panted all over the handsome salon, overturning furniture, breaking it, smashing bric-a-brac; Fenwick's face covered with blood, each man's silk shirt torn to ribbons. Allerton's face was unmarked, but looked pale and drawn.

Suddenly Stephen tripped on a rug, and Allerton drove his fist into his jaw with such force that it sent him reeling. Fenwick straightened from it, trembling. He shook his head; his face, a smother of blood, leered at the mate. He spoke with difficulty through swollen lips. His one open eye shot a light as white, and clean, and cold as steel.

"I was raised on them!" he growled.

In that instant the whole scheme of battle changed. Stephen drove the wily Allerton into a corner. The mate groped to clinch his foe; Fenwick eluded him and dealt him a right-hand blow from the hip upon his jaw that felled Allerton. He lay twitching upon the floor.

The fight was finished. Captain Lang pushed his way through the crowd of seamen, who scuttled away like rabbits.

"How did this start?" questioned the captain, gazing up into Fenwick's face, that bore little resemblance now to the Fifth Avenue exquisite.

"It seems to require no explanation," said Fenwick through swollen lips that somehow contrived a smile. "You better have your mate looked after. I'm going to my stateroom, and have Owonto fix me up."

"Oh, I'll look after the mate, all right!" exclaimed the skipper angrily.

Stephen glanced around the salon, and then hastened to the door that opened upon the lower deck.

Judith had disappeared. But she had seen the last of the battle. Fierce joy irradiated her. Judith was proud of the strength of her champion. Had he been a Knight of the Round Table jousting for her favor in the lists, she could have accorded him no more generous admiration than she was doing now.

Fenwick reached his stateroom. He and Owonto entered into the mysteries of restoration. In a half hour Stephen reclined at ease in an armchair, his cut lip only a little swollen, his eye just a trifle discolored, his whole face only a bit the worse for the terrible beating it had received from the fists of the mate.

He had donned silk pyjamas, and a gorgeous silk dressing gown, and had lighted a cigarette. He intended to go and find the girl as soon as he had refreshed himself with a smoke. There came a light tap at the door. Owonto was still engaged in removing evidences of the recent battle. Fenwick strode to the door, and opened it.

Judith stood there wide-eyed.

"I couldn't go to bed without thankin' you. I hope you ain't hurt!" There was anxiety in her face.

"Not a bit," cried Fenwick cheerily. "I'm quite ready for that walk on deck if you are."

"I don't feel like I was ever goin' to sleep again," said Judith.

"I feel the same," laughed Stephen. "You go back to your stateroom, and I'll

send my servant there with the coat and slippers I was bringing to you when the crash came. In about ten minutes I'll go out on deck. Will you be ready?"

"Yes, I'll be ready," acquiesced Judith.

Fifteen minutes later they were standing beside the railing. The character of the night had perceptibly changed. The moon swung now like a censer in a haze of clouds. The waves churning against the sides of the craft looked like buttermilk.

A sudden gust of wind cut through the rigging, whistled around the smokestack, and would have lifted Judith from her feet had not Stephen grasped the railing tightly, his arm across her back.

He felt her sway from the impact, and then recover. He glanced down at her. The cap—one of his—that she was wearing framed her face severely, bringing out the clear lines of her profile.

Who was she, he wondered; what had her life been like?

Stephen had never felt toward any woman as he now did toward this unnamed waif standing beside him, who had crept into his boat, into his life; and now he was obliged to confess to himself, into his heart!

Stephen Fenwick had known passion, unameliorated by softer emotions; he had known admiration for the qualities of a woman's mind; he had venerated the soul of one woman in sheer awe.

But now all these various emotions seemed coalesced into a great pulsing, bewildering elation. It seemed almost as if the girl had risen like Aphrodite, from the sea, a gift to him from the gods. She must be his, to protect, to love, to tenderly cherish.

All the depths of him were stirred by her need for help, her loveliness, her entire ignorance of the conventions; even her strange way of speaking attracted him; and her little austerities, her gaucheries! They were all a part of her!

Suddenly there swept into his brain words flung at him by Beverly Randolph. "If you were in love you would be ruthless!" She had been right, poor, simple little Beverly.

Her words had been right, but his application of them was different. He would be ruthless in love, but it would be toward any one or any thing that could harm the girl standing beside him.

CHAPTER IX.

THE STORM.

AN angrier man than Captain Lang it would have been difficult to find upon the high seas.

His heels ringing militantly, he stamped up and down the deck, giving brisk orders. The storm was rapidly gathering force. Churned by the wind, the waters foamed and swirled around the craft, flinging spindrift into the faces of the pair standing by the railing, watching in repelled fascination the white-fanged wolfish waves.

The captain growled to himself that he would put the damned young cubs in irons if they dared to fight on his ship again. He paused alongside Stephen.

"Nice thing you've done!" he shouted, above the roar of the elements. "How d'ye suppose I'm going to keep discipline in the face of that. Besides, I'll need Mr. Allerton to-night. I mean I need him if the crew has any respect left for him!"

"Isn't he all right by this time?" bawled Stephen in reply.

"Physically, yes!" gloomily wailed the skipper. "I just wish I'd heard of the thing sooner!" he grumbled.

"Yes?" queried Stephen, with rising inflection.

"Well, you'd both have known I am master of this vessel!" truculently called the captain.

"Glad to hear it, captain!" boomed Stephen cheerfully. "I feel safe now from raiders, storms, and all perils of the high seas, except the yellow peril you just conveyed to his cabin."

For an instant the storm seemed to pause for breath. There was a foaming lull.

"What was it all about?" complained the captain. "One of the seamen said there was a 'skoit' in it. Was it the stowaway? Leave it to a woman to raise hell among a lot of men!"

Stephen's compact figure hid from the skipper's view the slim form that straight-

ened at his words, even while Lang wondered at Fenwick's warning clutch at his arm.

Just then the storm roused, and a gust of wind struck the staunch craft amidships. She careened madly, and shivered like a thing with nerves, as a huge billow thundered down upon her.

The impact threw Judith back, and wrenched her hands from the railing. Stephen caught her as the ship righted, and set her on her feet, thanking the storm for the continued privilege of keeping his arm around her slender shoulders.

"Eh! *You* here?" gasped the chagrined captain in the teeth of the gale, as he spied the girl for the first time. He turned to Stephen. "Take her below!" he ordered.

"Can't I stay up here?" shrilled Judith above the fiendish din. "I ain't never seen a storm at sea before!"

"Leave you on deck to be washed off, and you'd never see another!" yelled the captain. "You go below! You've done damage enough on this craft. I'm not going to leave you up here to commit suicide!"

There came a torrential deluge of rain, whipped by the wind in sodden sheets. It seemed indeed suicidal for the girl to remain on deck. Another winged blast nearly toppled them from their feet.

Judith slipped toward the rail. Stephen swept her from her feet, and staggered with her down the stairs to the wrecked salon. He set her down while they both laughed a little, wiping the stinging brine from faces and eyes.

The music salon was in chaos. Fenwick opened the door into the little dining salon. Everything there was shipshape.

Judith followed, and stood beside the table in the center of the room, clinging desperately to it as the boat shivered and shook, thrumming on in the teeth of the gale, and the waves beat against the closed portholes.

"Will you remain here, or would you prefer to go to your stateroom?" asked Stephen.

"I'd like to stay here," she confessed, raising wide, startled eyes to his. It seemed that not till this last furious blare of the storm had she realized its menace.

He bent over her. "Are you frightened?"

"N-n-n-no! I ain't afraid. But I don't want to be down here alone. Seems like I've been alone all my life. I guess I'm beginnin' to hate my own comp'ny."

Fenwick's short laugh was a little grim. "I'm so accustomed to that feeling that I can quite sympathize with you. Wouldn't you like to remove your hat and coat? It seems oppressively warm in here!"

Anticipating his movement to assist her, Judith slipped out of the coat, and doffed the peaked headgear. Her hair, loosened under the cap, fell in a long, curling, twisting mass about her shoulders, and far below her waist.

Unconcernedly, oblivious to Fenwick's gaze, she coiled the shimmering mesh into a great knot low on her neck. Then she sat down precipitately upon a convenient lounge as the Psyche lurched terrifically.

"I guess we ain't never goin' to get to Brazil!" she observed with a wry little smile that was belied by shadows of concern in her eyes.

"Don't worry," Fenwick reassured. "The Psyche was built with the whole idea of 'safety first.'"

He sat down beside her. "What are you going to do when you get to Brazil? If you don't care to talk about the past, at least you have no objection to telling me your plans for the future. I don't wish to appear inquisitive. But since you are accidentally my guest, I feel in a way responsible for you."

"Oh, you needn't!" Judith assured him with an inimitable touch of her airy independence. "I'm goin' to dance, and make lots o' money, and be famous!"

Stephen smiled at the comprehensiveness of her ambitions and her naïve expectation of accomplishing them. It was his task to disillusion her—at least in part.

"I know," he began gravely, "but you can't start out in a strange country, and grow rich and famous all in a day. It takes time and influence for a young girl to make a successful stage career. Why, you don't even know the language!"

"I don't know any language!" cried Judith petulantly. "I'd like to learn to

sling English just like you do! I ain't never heard no one talk like you before."

Stephen laughed outright. The girl was deliciously naïve. He would not object in the least to teaching such an adorable pupil. He meant to teach her how to love, one day.

He was amazed at the absolutely sexless attitude of the girl. She was a revelation to him. The girls he had known had been different. The stowaway was femininity plus, and yet was as frank as a young boy.

Animated by a sudden thought, Judith turned toward him, recalling the skipper's words addressed to him upon the deck.

"What did the captain mean about trouble? A fight ain't nothin'. 'Twa'n't no trouble for you to fight, was it?"

Stephen shook his aggressive head in a decided negative. "No trouble at all, I assure you! It was one of the most rarely happy moments of my life.

"What Lang meant was that on account of the seamen and the necessary control of them that the officers must have on board ship, the mate and I should have waited, probably until we got to land, to settle any little difference that we might have had."

Judith's low laugh rippled. "Oh! I guess that wouldn't be your way, would it? You ain't the cautious kind!"

"You have learned something about human nature, at least, no matter what language you learned," complimented Fenwick.

The girl's pretty curved lips tensed in a straight line. "I guess I had to learn that much," she volunteered reluctantly.

Her mind was carrying her swiftly to the hut on the river bank, and back through the horrible years of her youth and childhood.

Just then, above the din and thunder of the storm there boomed the report of a gun—another, and another!

A gun of the Psyche in a moment answered in kind, while the two occupants of the dining salon listened. The thrill of the firing could be felt.

"What was that?" queried Judith, wide-eyed.

"A ship in distress, I imagine. I had better go and see. You won't mind remaining here alone just for a few minutes?"

"No," she assured him. "You go. I'd go with you, but the captain would send me back, I s'pose," she said wistfully.

"Yes, I suppose he would," agreed Stephen gravely. "Besides, you look fagged. Let me fix you up comfortably here on the sofa. I'll get pillows."

Stephen left for his stateroom to secure the pillows. Owonto was to follow with blankets. When Stephen returned to the sofa, Judith was fast asleep. Despite the storm and attendant anxiety, her eyes had closed almost as soon as he closed the door.

He raised her head carefully, tempted to leave a soft kiss upon the curving red lips. He beat back the desire, though when he straightened, after placing her head on the pillow, he was shaking.

He had mastered himself; that was the great point. Biblical quotations were not much in Stephen's line. But now he recalled vaguely that, somewhere in immortal Scriptural history, some one had observed that "he who ruleth himself is greater than he who taketh a city."

Now to see what all the fuss was about on deck! Everybody aboard seemed scrambling about the craft.

With a last look at the sleeping girl, he hastened to his stateroom. Owonto had reached there, and was cowering in a corner.

"Psyche; he sink!" he chattered, his teeth clinking. "Big gun, him shoot!"

"Get my oilskins, and keep your teeth in your head. You may need them after the storm," advised Stephen succinctly.

Weak-kneed but obedient, the Japanese secured his master's rain clothes, and helped him into them. In a moment Fenwick was climbing the salon companionway.

As his head emerged he found that he had thrust it into unexpected furies. A smother of rain and wind rendered him breathless. He staggered out upon the deck as a seaman reeled toward him, fumbling to batten down the companion hatch.

"What's the row?" bawled Fenwick. "What's the—" He stopped abruptly,

mouth gaping, eyes closing spasmodically under the sting of briny spray. Realization had flashed to him that the man, now bending to his work over the companionway, could not hear his words. More, he could not hear them himself!

A voice, mightier than the voices of a host of humans, was sounding, wailing, thunderous, terrible; the voice of the storm, now deepened in seven-fold fury, caught his own puny speech, and flung it back in his strangling throat.

An instant he stood, weaving and choking, his feet instinctively clutching for foothold on the wet and sliding deck. His senses were numbed by his sudden entry into the wallowing fury that had, in the little time since he had taken Judith below decks, crescendoed. He had left wildness; he now stared into chaos.

Hedged with opaque gloom, the Psyche's lights trembled forth a little way, to be lost in the combing crests of mountainous seas, weird, gray, monstrously inchoate, like the visionings of madmen.

The next instant, as the yacht plunged down into the trough, even these shimmerings of reassurance were extinguished. The dim form of the seaman next to Fenwick was blotted out; he could not see his hand before his face.

For the moment a blind terror seized his spirit. It could have been no darker under the waters than it was now above them; he felt an intolerable sense of suffocation, as if he were drowning under the waves.

Up climbed the Psyche again, like some dogged creature indigenous to the deeps. Up again into the bared fangs of the waves, and again the trembling rays went searching as if for massed battalions of armed men.

Now a far more powerful shaft of radiance swung slowly into the arc of Fenwick's strained vision, illumining the boiling wastes for a great distance.

It was the yacht's searchlight, shifting from the opposite side.

It revealed an appalling danger.

The seaman had just finished battening down the companion-hatch. Now he recoiled, colliding with Stephen. Instinctively they clutched each other. Full in the searchlight's flare a giant wave in a solid wall of towering death bore down upon the yacht.

In the instant some bits of reasoning observation, grotesquely disassociated, stirred Stephen's brain.

This was the end! The sleeping girl, she would never know! Why had he not remained below, to meet death with her? The four winds wrestled together in this hell; the waves whirled in a cauldron; death raced to swallow life now!

With a roar like the thrum of doom the giant billow broke, and raked the deck.

Stephen and the seaman were now locked in a desperate embrace as the yacht reeled sidewise. The wash caught them, overwhelmed them, spun them, reeling, across the deck. Then, snarling, it receded as the Psyche, that had somehow survived the crashing impact, numbly reeled to an even keel.

Strangling, nearly senseless, half-drowned, they heard roaring of waters, smashing of bulwarks, thud of metal falling, the splintering of woodwork under tons of brine and spume, as the deck was washed clear of everything movable.

Stephen had landed against the rail with force that brought from his lips a strangled groan of pain. He lay for a moment mechanically groping for realities, fighting for breath; through his side darted an agonizing pain. He feared dully that his ribs had been broken. But as his head cleared and he drew a long breath, he realized that he had only been badly bruised.

The yacht was still pitching and rolling horribly, but she seemed to be fairly swimming in calmness compared with the grinding crash that had just occurred. Fenwick struggled to his knees. He stared down into chaos. Again the yacht had dipped into the hollow of a wave. But now came a flare of lightning, accompanied with a smash of thunder. Upturned to him was the seaman's face, livid, with closed eyes.

"Knocked out!" muttered Fenwick.

Stephen stooped, and despite the pain the effort cost him in his wrenched state, raised the heavy body, and slung it limply over a shoulder. The yacht lurched

sickeningly. Fenwick's feet slipped, his side banging into the rail.

Giddy with pain, his lips tightened with savage defiance as he recovered, and took two staggering steps aft. Another lightning flash showed just ahead of him the dripping oil-skinned figures of two seamen, fighting for foothold. He reached them, plucking at a hand feeling along the rail. The men turned.

"Hurt!" bawled Stephen in his ear. "Banged against rail—wave! Get him below. Call doctor!"

The two men relieved him of his burden, and staggered away. Stephen turned toward the dim glow, lost in alternating moments in seething rain, which marked the location of the wheelhouse.

He had forgotten his original errand, to inquire regarding the booming of a distant gun, and the Psyche's response in kind.

Would the dawn find the yacht still floating, with her living freight, he wondered.

In reply to his query a fresh blast of wind in this instant sought out the yacht, as if it would blow the craft from the face of the waters. It sucked the air from Stephen's lungs, and for a moment he crouched by the railing, gasping.

There welled in him a dull anger against this derisive destructive element that forever defies man, who, though he has harnessed the lightning, is powerless before the wind.

Both hands gripping the rail, Stephen wormed his way, inch by inch, against the resisting wind toward the wheelhouse.

In a portentous lull, which lasted no more than a moment before chaos resumed with renewed fury, he caught from over his head a weird, droning, sputtering sound. The Psyche's operator was at the key of the wireless apparatus.

Just then the furor of waves created by the last onslaught of the wind, rose to a maximum of ferocity and swept across the deck, nearly tearing Fenwick from his hold. It left him shaking, not from physical weakness; from something more disturbing, from fear.

It was the fear of death!

Until now he had never thought much about death. Several times, in moments of adventure, its black wings had brushed him. But it had not seemed possible that one day the universal spectre would clutch him. In his glowing youth and splendid vigor it had seemed a menace infinitely remote, nothing to be feared nor reckoned with in the present.

But now it was here, waiting! Glowering with black face, lighted with eyes of writhing lightnings, sobbing and wailing in its tripled voice of rolling thunders, shrieking wind, crashing seas, gathering inexhaustible power to overwhelm all life.

For a terrible moment Fenwick fought the common human fear that sooner or later each spirit must encounter, perhaps early in life, perhaps at the supreme moment itself, the horror of the unseen.

It was an elemental terror caused by an elemental condition.

What of the egoistic daring of puny man! In a frail fashioning of wood and steel to pit himself against the unleashed elements of the universe!

He was dimly conscious of a renewal of the impulse to make his way back to the cabin, to gather Judith in his arms. The sea had given her to him; now it wished to claim her again. She must not be left to meet the final mystery alone.

Then curiously, in his distraction, came a sense of calming. Remotely he sensed it, a methodical something like the ticking of a watch. It neared him, coming closer till it finally entered his consciousness. It beat in his brain with rhythmic steadiness that gripped and fused his bewildered forces.

At last he knew what it was! The throbbing of marvelous machinery, like the beating of a stout heart, that drove the ship onward through the storm!

Fenwick felt kindling within him a kindred defiance, as he felt the pulsing of the craft.

If she were destined to die, the Psyche would die fighting!

A little later he staggered into the wheelhouse. The helmsman was crumpled in a corner. Captain Lang, grim-lipped, tensed, steely-eyed, was at the wheel. He flashed Stephen a glance; then again his eyes darted ahead.

"Our chances? What are they?" Fenwick bawled the question close to his ear, above the roar of wind and wave.

Lang shook his head. "I don't know!" he called back. "I don't know!"

CHAPTER X.

"S O S."

SUDDENLY the captain gave the wheel a sharp turn. "There she comes!" he cried.

Stephen peered with him into the swirl of menacing waters. The nose of the yacht dug downward as if she were diving straight for the bottom of the ocean. A fantastic memory of his childhood recurred to Stephen of the time when he had asked his father whether the deep waters of his own land and of China were one with no land in between.

The Psyche swooped upward out of the curdling cauldron, climbing the sliding green wall of a giant spent wave.

Battered by billows, torn by the screaming wind, the desired prey of the mad night, she struggled on.

Just then Stephen's strained ears again heard, in a fleeting lull, the sputtering of the wireless.

"The call—what is it?" he shouted, gesturing toward the source of sound.

"Answer to ship in distress!" screamed the captain. "She's been sending the S O S call— We can't do anything now— If the Psyche weathers storm, we'll try to pick her up, best we can do— We're in bad case ourselves; two bulkheads smashed, getting worse all the time—do our best—"

Stephen's answer came in fitful snatches above the roar.

"I'll go below again—came up to see what—"

"All hell's let loose!" cried the captain. "Top mast gone—worst storm I ever—hope engines stand up—guess they—Psyche built for strength—speed—"

Again the storm lulled a little. "Backbone of the storm may be broken—hope so!" cried the captain as Fenwick left the wheelhouse.

Stephen's mastering desire now was to return to the girl he had left below. He reproached himself for having come up on deck at all. She must be in mortal terror down there alone.

He gave a parting thought to the captain and the resting helmsman as he left the wheelhouse. He was useless here, worse than that, even in the way. He must get back where perhaps he might be of some use.

A dripping seaman opened the hatch for him, and as Stephen disappeared it was battened down again. The storm began raging with redoubled fury. A roll of the yacht, which set things jingling below, nearly precipitated him down the stairway, just as the electric lights winked out.

Staggering down the remainder of the way in darkness, he stripped off his soaked oilskins, leaving them upon the floor of the wrecked salon.

Running into chairs, bumping into tables, suddenly his hands came crashing down on the piano keys in a villainous discord, at one with the crashing storm.

He had lost all sense of direction. He backed away from the piano, and stood still, trying to reconstruct the interior arrangement of the salon, with the piano as the starting point.

He wondered how the girl was faring, where she was; for surely she could not have slept through this thunderous clamor.

A great wave of longing for her welled in his heart.

Never again would he have that sense of loneliness which had begun when he was a little boy, and had been first sent from home to a fashionable military school. Always there would nestle close to his heart the image of this girl whom the sea had delivered to him.

After all, the sea could be kind as well as cruel. If only now he might find her, and the storm would cease, the beginnings of peace cheating death of life!

There came the mysterious sense that somebody was near him. Above the crash of the storm he heard nothing; it was just an instinctive recognition of the presence of sentient life. Then after a moment, the storm lulled. He heard a voice.

"Mr. Fenwick! Mr. Fenwick!"

The voice was low, as if she had no expectation of an answer. With a thrill he divined that she had been calling his name, and in so doing extracted some measure of comfort.

"Yes!" he cried in response. "I am here! Where are you?"

A curious sense assailed him as he called, a sense that somehow his reply was unfinished. Simultaneously the answer occurred to him. The response was oddly lacking; it contained a quality incongruously impersonal. For, even as he spoke, his mind went instinctively searching for her name, that as yet he had not heard.

"I don't know where I am," faltered the voice in the darkness, the tone now strengthened with reassurance from the sound of his words.

It seemed to come from some little distance. The room was spacious, and as black as Stygian night.

They continued to call each other, and to grope. Finally Stephen's outstretched hands touched her hair.

They dropped to her slender shoulders. The girl's hands clutched wildly at his coat.

His arms closed about her shoulders. His pulses throbbed wildly as she made no move to draw away; all the palpitating loveliness of her seemed to melt in his arms.

He held her closer; he could feel her heart beating in fright against his own.

In the darkness he heard a stifled sound, a low sob that held the pathos of a child wrung by fear in the dark. Then he realized that terror was the influence that had quickened her heart-beats; he knew that she was resting there in his arms through her sore need to be comforted.

Under the spur of this knowledge all the chivalry of his tempestuous nature responded. For the moment she ceased to be the woman of all women to be desired. She became a child in need of comforting.

The pressure of his arms, that had been rough, relaxed, and gained in tenderness.

"You are frightened!" he whispered into her ear, while they swayed as the yacht rolled under their feet.

Her voice came in answer, broken, trembling:

"Yes—I didn't want to die—alone! I'm —I'm afraid of the awful dark, and the water—and the minute when I can't breathe any more. I—I ain't never been afraid of the dark before—but I don't want to die now!"

So youth implored for life as its right; sentient life, appalled in the shadow of death! The old, when all is done, might become resigned to death—but now youth voiced its revolt against the mystery.

He held an arm tenderly about her waist while his free hand groped till it found a chair.

He appraised their chances, and found them slender. The sickening pitching of the yacht was increasing; penetrating the battened interior of the craft came the wild shrieks of the storm.

There came a strangely solemn thought. If it were not given him to live with her, he could die with her, this waif whose name he did not know, given to him by the sea that now outstretched for her again—and him—it writhing arms.

All the moral strength that was his heritage rose in him as he sat down in the big armchair, and cradled her in his arms as if she had been a child.

"Little girl," he said tenderly, "perhaps I can help you to face—whatever may come."

A smothered voice sounded in the region of his coat.

"You've helped me so! I'll be brave. I ain't never goin' to be scared no more—of anything. I'm tired."

She slid from his knees to the soft carpet, and rested there, her head laid against his knees.

"Too tired to listen?" he asked gently.

"No. It's like readin' a story that makes you forget."

In the darkness he smiled at the quaint tribute. Then he told her stories of his travels, his adventures in far countries.

Judith listened entranced as she had so often listened to the old sailor in distant New York, and with more absorption; for here was expressed a mind far richer. And unlike Sowers's outpourings, the tales of Stephen held the undeviating convincingness of truth.

She forgot the rattling of the storm, the sullen danger, the menace that had palsied her forces a little while before. She forgot everything tangible, as her imagination traveled with Fenwick through realms she loved in dreams.

At last his voice grew misty, remote—and ceased. Judith slept like a child, curled up on the carpet, her head against Fenwick's knees.

Suddenly, divining from her deep, regular breathing that she was asleep, Stephen fell silent. His hand stole down, softly touching her hair, lingeringly yet fearfully lest the touch waken her.

All that was best in the man was uppermost. He whose creed it had been to serve himself now found altruistic delight in serving the need of this waif, in helping her in a dark hour.

He smoothed her hair gently, with reverence. She stirred faintly. He withdrew his hand and he sat there musing, looking down. He could not see her, but he heard her rhythmic breathing in the darkness.

Though his legs grew cramped, he did not stir. After awhile he too fell asleep.

The gray of dawn, struggling through the portholes, found them still sleeping.

He wakened first, and, sitting there quietly, gazed down at her, his wonder girl with the beautiful tumbled hair. His senses searched adjustment.

He looked about the salon. Clear rays of light streamed in at the portholes; the motion of the yacht was no longer violent; there was a steady roll, but he could feel the reassuring thrum of the engines.

The voice of the storm was stilled, and now from somewhere above came the cheery call of a seaman.

A glow of thankfulness warmed his spirit. He leaned over and touched Judith upon the shoulder, smiling down at her as she stirred and opened her bewildered eyes.

"Little girl," said Stephen softly, "it is dawn, and the storm is over."

She stared at him a moment in bewilderment, and then heaved a great sigh as she started to rise. His hand assisted her.

"I went to sleep," she cried. "What do you know about that?"

Quite casually Judith accepted the fact of her safety.

With the whimsical reflection that it was not very much as yet that he knew about that, or her either, Fenwick answered smilingly as he watched her lithe figure as she drew herself up to her full height to remove the ache from her cramped muscles:

"I slept deeply myself; just awoke this instant. You'd like to go to your stateroom now, I fancy."

Judith nodded.

"Then breakfast, and will you come and have it with me?"

"Yes," assented Judith, "if you want me to."

"I do indeed. In about half an hour, in the dining salon. How would this menu suit you: Thin bacon, fried crisp, eggs, hot corn muffins, a cereal, and coffee?"

He stood there, his hair tousled, his clothing crumpled and crushed; but his spirits were buoyant, his eyes bright and dancing with the smile that irradiated his whole ugly, fascinating face.

"I'd like all them things," conceded Judith smilingly.

They had weathered the storm together; there still remained, after the terrible despair of the night, life—life to devote to love, work, happiness. He felt an almost irresistible impulse to take her in his arms. A saving memory of the sexlessness of her yielding the previous night came to him. She had come to trust him; he instinctively knew that she did not love him in the way he loved her. Love, the divine madness of the gods, must bide until later.

"I guess we almost got drowneded, didn't we?" she questioned gravely.

She sensed something different about him; he seemed to have telepathically communicated to her his mastery of himself, the fruition of some hitherto latent power, born perhaps of the danger of the night.

"Yes, almost, I think," he replied in a tone as grave as her own.

She looked at him a moment meditatively. In her mind a thought was forming. She mulled it over a moment then it found expression.

"I guess you like people that you almost

get drowneded with," she said. In her voice conviction struggled with surprise at such an amazing discovery.

"I guess you do!" agreed Stephen.

CHAPTER XI.

AN ERRAND OF MERCY.

STEPHEN saw Judith to her stateroom door.

"Remember, in half an hour," he warned smilingly, with upraised finger. "The feminine sex is noted for its entire disregard of time."

"I ain't goin' to be no different. What would happen if I was late?" she coquetted.

"Don't be late. I shall count the moments till I see you again," admitted Stephen.

The undercurrent of truth in his statement made his voice vibrant.

"I ain't got any timepiece," dimpled Judith. "I used to tell time by the sun, but the sun ain't shinin'."

"I'll send Owonto with a clock. You can take all the time in which to make your toilet that you wish," he conceded.

"A half an hour's enough," admitted the girl, now that he had given her her way.

She closed the door slowly, peeping at him coquettishly until at last it slammed to with a little bang, caught by a current of air that was blowing freshly through the stateroom.

She stood for a moment as if spellbound, regarding the door fixedly.

She was astonished at herself. She, Judith Reading, was actually coquetting with one of her hereditary enemies.

"I don't feel like the same girl," she soliloquized wonderingly as she fared about the stateroom.

She flung open a door that she had not noticed the evening before. It was one in which was set a long mirror.

"Oh!" she cried, clasping her hands in admiration. There, in all its embroidered glory of gold dragons, butterflies, and a clambering wistaria vine laden with flowers, hung the gorgeous mandarin coat. It was wadded and lined with soft satin. She explored further and found a white linen skirt, some white silk blouses, and a pair of white pumps that looked tiny to Judith.

In great consternation she ran over to the drawer where she had found the lingerie, and began tumbling out the piles of neatly folded articles. At the very bottom —after she had about given up in despair— she found what she was looking for, a pair of white silk stockings.

In the meantime Stephen made a hurried toilet, and had gone up on deck. He met Captain Lang, pale and wan-eyed, coming from the wheelhouse.

While he, Stephen, had slept, this man had remained up through the night, fighting with forces of body and will, for the yacht.

"Thanks to you," Stephen rendered tribute, "we are still here."

"No, don't thank me. The Psyche's construction was all that your father contracted for," replied Lang. "Let the expense go hang!" he said. "I want a safe craft. Which is the only reason that any of us are here; for it would have been impossible to launch the lifeboats in that sea."

"It's the governor's way of doing things," commented Big Fenwick's son.

The captain swept the sea with his glasses.

"How about the S O S?" queried Stephen.

"It's from an English trading schooner coming from Brazil," answered the captain. "Wired her masts had blown away, her engine was out of business, and that she had collided with some wreckage and sprung a leak. An old tub, anyhow, I know. Said her men would take to the boats before long.

"We're cruising around now, trying to locate her. Of course we were blown many leagues apart during the storm, but we may have luck. I hope the poor devils won't drown before we can place her or the boats."

The wind had subsided, but Stephen looked doubtfully at a gray mountainous swell. The captain caught his thought.

"The storm stopped in a twinkling, an hour after you had gone below," he said. "Of course, we couldn't do anything in

this sea. But it will subside considerably before night, and by that time I hope to pick up the boats. We can get them alongside, and take off the men by careful handling, if we are so fortunate as to have the chance. Now I must get some sleep. Mr. Allerton is in charge." His tired eyes twinkled at Stephen.

"I'll keep out of his way," assured the young man with droll appreciation.

Captain Lang chuckled. "By the way," he asked, "how is the girl?"

"Quite safe," replied Stephen.

"Some frightened?"

"A little. So was I," admitted Stephen.

"A fool never gets frightened. Some call absence of fright bravery. It can be conquered, and a man can do his part bravely, but I don't believe that a normal man or woman was ever faced with death by accident without at the first moment experiencing what we call fear—that is, if they have time to think at all."

He turned toward the companionway with a tired sigh.

Stephen tramped up and down the deck to get the fatigue out of his muscles. Seamen who were busy repairing the ravages done by the storm bade him cheery good morning.

This young son of Big Fenwick had become a sort of hero to them because of his great physical prowess. This feeling for him was to be of inestimable value to him later.

Besides, the common danger through which they had all passed triumphantly gave them all a fellow-feeling.

Stephen's spirits again winged as he paced up and down the deck and gazed out over the gray expanse of sea. He humorously reflected that he had entirely underestimated the capacity of the Atlantic Ocean to provide excitement. Within twenty-four hours he had fallen in love, enjoyed a corking fight, and the craft had weathered a tremendous storm.

Now, if the fates were kind, they would rescue this vessel in distress, if her crew and officers had not already been rescued by some other vessel, or they had not perished.

He shuddered as he visualized for a moment the terrible pictures, the chaos of the now fairly calm sea—pictures forever engraved upon the sensitized plate of his memory.

There came the thought of the girl and her sweet reliance upon him. He glanced at his watch.

The half hour was up. He would reconnoiter.

He ran down the stairs as if he had borrowed the wings of Mercury. He sought the dining salon and entered impetuously. She was there, a gorgeous apparition. A half hour had been sufficient for her toilet, which she had completed with an eagerness that matched his own.

She had dressed herself from top to toe in creamy white. She had determinedly squeezed her feet into the tiny white shoes she had found; they hurt only a trifle; and then just because she could not resist the temptation of that bit of barbaric embroidery, she had flung that over the white gown. The result made Stephen's pulses leap a little faster than normal.

"How beautiful you are!"

He paused upon the other side of the table and gazed across at her. His voice was a little thick, slightly tremulous.

Judith liked this man's compliments. Her liking was at one with her perception that she had changed somewhat in her attitude toward the masculine gender since she had known him.

"Ain't it—the—coat?" she stammered. "I was so glad that we didn't get drowneded that I felt like celebratin'."

Her hands stroked the soft satin lingeringly, lovingly.

"That ain't all the ttruth," she confessed shyly. "I guess I just naturally love pretty things. I had to put it on."

"I'm glad you did, Miss Stowaway. It isn't the coat, however, that makes you beautiful. By the way, do you know that you haven't told me your name?"

He had gone around to the other side of the table, and was holding the chair for Judith. She did not understand this simple courtesy; so she made no move to be seated, but stood facing him.

Her name! One that was even now per-

haps blazoned all over New York as that of a supposed murderess! Fugitives from justice always changed their names.

A sudden resolve seized her. She would change hers!

"My name is Violet Gray."

Stephen could scarcely refrain from laughing; the name was so patently not hers.

"May I call you Miss Violet?" he asked seriously. "Violet is prettier than Gray, don't you think?"

"I think Violet Gray is a pretty name. I've always liked that name. But you can call me Miss Violet if you want to."

"Will you not be seated, Miss Violet?" he asked, nodding toward the chair.

With quick perception Miss Violet Gray dropped into the first chair that had ever been drawn out from table for her.

The well-appointed table, laid with shining white damask and polished silver; the silver racks for the dishes; the dish of grapefruit before her with a red cherry in the center, somehow made the man opposite to her, to whom these things were all a matter of course, seem a thousand miles away from her.

Judith would have liked to run away. She felt timid. It showed in her manner. Stephen chatted genially as he half unfolded his napkin, and laid it on his knees.

He meant to put her entirely at her ease. But he had undertaken a larger commission than he realized. He selected a spoon, and began eating his grapefruit.

"Watchful waiting" was Judith's slogan. She did likewise. She struggled bravely with the fruit until a tiny stream of the fruit malignantly squirted into her eyes.

"Oh!" she cried through swift tears. "Oh, it hurts!"

Stephen was around the table in an instant. He whipped out a spotless linen handkerchief, poured some ice water from a tumbler upon it, and bathed her smarting eyes. Owonto discreetly disappeared.

The Oriental's eyes had never betrayed his wonder at the presence of the beautiful lady. Beautiful ladies had dined and supped and breakfasted and lunched with his master before many times. Besides, he was pretty well shaken from the storm.

Stephen's hand trembled as he went back to his chair. His head was in a whirl. How was he ever going to endure these intimate little passages, he wondered?

Breakfast was finished with no more necessity for his assistance in the capacity of "first aid." He talked fast, to relieve his own emotional tumult. He told her of the condition of the Psyche after the storm, of the ship that had called to them out of the night, of the bravery of Captain Lang, and of the others of the crew.

Judith was a splendid listener; her eyes sparkled with appreciation. To her query, if he did not think her a coward, Stephen quoted Captain Lang's words about fools.

"We will go for a walk now," he suggested as they rose from the table. "You need the air, and this time I imagine you can remain up as long as you please."

"I shall wear your coat and cap?" she questioned. "And if you ain't too busy to-day, could you please—begin to learn me to talk?" she asked shyly.

The request was so naïve, so sincere; she was so adorably sweet, so wonderfully beautiful, that she upset Stephen's equanimity almost completely.

"I'll begin the moment you have taken a brisk walk. We must not neglect to cultivate the roses that bloom in your cheeks, you know."

Stephen owed something to his remote Irish ancestry, when it came to love making. The roses that bloomed in her cheeks glowed a deeper pink, and an adorable little wave of color flushed her velvety white throat, and was lost somewhere in the collar of her silk blouse.

"And while we are walking you can con over your first language lesson. There isn't any such word in the English language as 'ain't.'"

"Ain't there?" she queried bewilderedly.

"There 'is not.'" He shook his finger at her in a very schoolmasterly fashion.

"Oh!" said Judith, "then where I've been saying 'ain't' I should say 'is not'?"

"Why, yes, unless you wish to say 'was not,' or 'are not,' or 'were not,' or 'have not,' or—did you ever study English grammar?"

"Yes. I studied it in school. But I

ain't—haven't ever—no! I have never heard it properly spoken!"

She looked at him triumphantly.

"You see, it will be quite easy for you to learn," he decided. "That sentence was quite all that it should be. Just remember what you learned in school, and forget the way you have heard it spoken, and there you are; very simple."

"Yes," agreed Judith, "but habits ain't—are not so easy—easy—easily dropped." She appeared to be talking to herself.

"My voice is hoarse as a raven's, ain't—isn't it?"

"No, your voice is quite all right," assured Stephen.

The doctor was standing by the railing when Stephen and Judith emerged from the companionway for their constitutional.

"Ah, there you are! I was just wondering if you had survived the storm?" greeted Stephen.

"Survived!" echoed the doctor. "Wasn't that an artistic bit of storm, though? I thought we were due in Davy Jones's locker all right. How is Miss Stowaway this morning?"

"Quite all right, thank you," said Judith gravely, imitating Stephen's way of talking.

The doctor looked at her, a little puzzled frown appearing between his eyes.

"Miss Gray has consented to walk with me. Will you come?" asked Stephen.

"Sorry. Have a lot to do this morning. Some of the seamen were disabled last night. I just came up for a breath of air. Heard you were on deck during the worst of it."

"Yes, for my sins. Solid land would have looked good to me for a while. Sorry you can't come with us."

"Sorry, too. See you later," said the doctor, who went below still with the little puzzled frown puckering his brow.

Poor transparent Judith, who was struggling to make herself over, would have worn a more puzzled frown than did the doctor could she have known his thoughts.

The day wore away with the Psyche still cruising around in the vicinity where she had last heard the S O S call. No more calls came; so it was evident to Captain Lang that the schooner's wireless must have been put out of commission by the storm.

During late afternoon Allerton thought he descried dim on the western horizon, the outline of a hull, which might or might not be that of the luckless schooner.

Later, through binoculars, the captain made sure of its identity. The crew of the schooner must have spied the yacht before their abandoned ship was sighted by the lookout; for on the face of the heaving gray wastes, already halfway to the Psyche, were two moving specks.

A half an hour dragged by, while the yacht moved toward the specks, which continually grew larger. Then she lay to while faint shouts came over the water.

Lights flared to life over the yacht's deck. A searchlight sought out the boatloads, close together, and directed them to the side of the Psyche.

Stephen stood by the deck railing, watching them approach. Judith had gone below.

Now the ladder was lowered over the side. Up it wearily climbed the refugees, garbed in the uniform of the English merchant marine. There were about twenty of them. They replied weakly to the hearty welcome and expressions of sympathy tendered by the yacht's crew. Several of them dropped, apparently exhausted, upon the deck.

The second boat was now alongside, and the attention of Lang and his men was transferred to the men from this boat, whom they helped over the side.

Almost under Stephen's feet lay one of the seamen, who had collapsed there. With feline stealthiness, he gathered himself on hands and knees, as if about to spring; his eyes were narrowed.

The other brine-soaked figures about the captain came to that same stealthy position, like a cat about to spring.

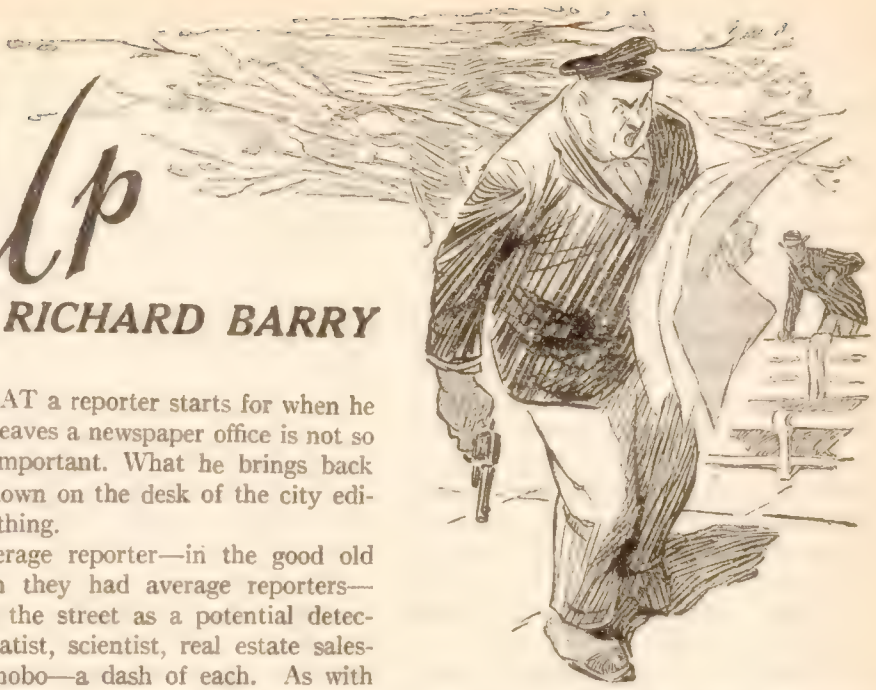
Intuitively Stephen divined an amazing situation. With a wild cry of warning he cast himself headlong at the crouching figure at his feet.

The next moment the deck of the Psyche was like a madhouse.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Up

By RICHARD BARRY



WHAT a reporter starts for when he leaves a newspaper office is not so important. What he brings back and lays down on the desk of the city editor is the thing.

The average reporter—in the good old days when they had average reporters—went onto the street as a potential detective, dramatist, scientist, real estate salesman and hobo—a dash of each. As with Francis Bacon, all knowledge was his province. But he had to go beyond Bacon. All action had to be his province, too.

When he came back, if he made good, he landed at the desk of the city editor with the added qualities—a dash of each—of the winner of the six-day bicycle race, the final arbiter of the proceedings of the World Court, and—Oh! Henry!

A young man of this breed—the good ones come mostly young, for it is a profession like prize fighting where a man at thirty is usually referred to as an old-timer—drifted into the office of the Cincinnati *Banner* one afternoon a few years ago.

He had reached the mature age of twenty-one after knocking about the newspaper offices of the Middle West for four years. Looking for a job, he had found this more difficult than ever before, as times were hard, work scarce, and he had never been longer than six months in one place so that he was known as a "floater."

For the first time in his life he felt a bit desperate. He had not eaten in twenty-four hours and was down to his last dollar, which he was guarding jealously. He figured that when he got an assignment he would blow that to a square meal so he could cover it.

The city editor received him appropriately in the vernacular of the trade, with "sorry, old man, but the staff is full. If you want to break in the only way is with a jimmy."

"How would the *Banner* like an exclusive murder?"

"Good! We can always use one."

"Then I'll go out and murder some one. I feel up to it."

"I'd go slow on that—might get you into trouble. But why don't you land this sniper who's got the town by the short hair? Killed another man from ambush an hour ago. We're getting out an extra on it. Cop him and the chief will make a feature job for you. But bring him into this office before you take him to the police station, so we can hold him until we can get the news on the street."

This seemed unfeeling badinage. With a wry smile the reporter replied: "With the entire police force after him, with every member of this staff looking for him, as well as every other newspaper man in town, and the whole population of Cincinnati to boot—huh!" He sighed wearily and turned away.

A suggestion of near despair in the reporter, or perhaps a wistfulness in the smile

shining through his dejection, caused the editor to add impulsively: "Say, here's a tip. It's an idea I've had dormant for a long while. Maybe you can grab it."

The boy turned eagerly and grasped at the straw.

"It's to prevent a suicide," said the editor. "I believe it can be done."

"And you want an 'exclusive' on it?"

"No object otherwise."

The reporter protested: "I'd have a better chance worming my way into the confidence of a thief on the verge of a burglary than into the confidence of a suicide. I guess you're just ragging me."

"No," returned the editor, "I am merely offering you for nothing, because I have taken a shine to you, a tip it has taken me ten years of service on this desk to acquire."

"It took you ten years to think up *that* idea?"

"There's more to it. Listen. We've got a big German population in Cincinnati. If this were an Irish town the chance to pick a suicide in advance would be nil. A Mick would bump himself off whenever he feels like it, in the middle of the day or the night, whenever he is blue enough; that's his final expression of emotional intensity.

"It's different with a Teuton. With him suicide is the baffled revelation of intellectual poverty, and he is usually orderly about it. Now take a morning, an early morning, especially a rainy one, when times are bad. Nearly every morning like that—this is where the ten years' observation comes in—produces a Dutch suicide for us.

"The Nordic temperament is inclined to be observant of the decencies, too. It will not only plan the thing in advance, but will try to do it with as little disorder as possible. Observing this, I've long had the notion a man might Sherlock Holmes his way into a pre-suicide."

"Huh!" mused the reporter, cogitating.

"I can be even more explicit," the editor warmed to his hunch. "Putting yourself in the place of the man whose mind has about abandoned all hold on life—a Dutchman—you will find he means to go to Riverside Park—city property, where the refuse man cleans up—about dawn, and there, secluded, will drink his poison, or shoot himself. Now, if you can step in on one of those episodes—"

"I'll try."

"Don't mistake me. I don't want a suicide. They're covered for us by the city news, but if you can prevent a suicide, and bring us the facts, authenticated—"

"Much obliged," the reporter thanked him. "I'll do my best." As he went down the stairs he said to himself: "That's a tough one!"

He dined that night—on fifty cents.

The next dawn he was at the entrance to Riverside Park. Presently, along came a dawdling figure, shuffling, hands in pocket, gaze on the ground, a slouch hat pulled over his face.

The reporter slipped to the ground. The shuffling figure passed him, feet slowly dragging, and now it could be seen that one of his pockets bulged outward with a parcel whose paper top protruded.

The light was very dull. Yet it was day. A slight drizzle, hardly a rain, more like a heavy fog, penetrated to the flesh.

The shuffling man came to a halt in the rear of a bench, half-fell, half-stumbled to his knees, bowed his head and held his hands before him in an attitude of prayer.

Behind a bush near by hid the reporter, his heart in his throat. He realized that he must nicely calculate his action. He must first be certain that this was indeed a suicide. Also, he must prevent it.

However, it was equally necessary that he possess proof of the fact as of the motive.

Respect mounted for the editor whose intuition had directed him to this spot that he might become the god in the machine of this obscure tragedy.

The silent prayer, if such it was, was over. The man took from his pocket the parcel and from the cumbersome folds of a newspaper unwrapped a heavy, old-fashioned revolver.

The reporter edged his way to within a space which he could encompass with a single leap, and he was about to cry out when his action was stayed by the fact that the man placed the revolver carefully

on the bench before him and fixed an intense gaze on the paper in which it had been wrapped.

Ensued a silent moment. Then the man leaped in the air, waved his paper aloft and threw down the revolver as he cried: "*Gott im Himmel! Mein Rosa! Mein kind!*"

Whereupon he rushed from the park like a truck horse on a sudden holiday. The reporter picked up the revolver, pocketed it and swiftly followed. He was led through a maze of streets, down Custer way, up an alley, into a decrepit lodging, up three flights of stairs.

The man burst into a mean room and precipitated himself on a bed obscured in the half light of early morning. The reporter, edging a crafty way in, and unnoticed for the moment in the preoccupation of the two who were there, saw the barest furniture: an iron cot, a wooden chair, and, on the floor, a mattress evidently lately slept on.

Out of the bed now rose the figure of a child, evidently a girl, judging by the long curls and the soft treble of the excited voice. She embraced and kissed the man who held her tensely in his huge arms, while he mumbled in broken English.

After a moment the reporter made a slight noise with his foot. The man wheeled on him with sudden fury, thrusting himself between the child and the door in which stood the intruder.

"I want to speak to you—" began the reporter.

"Mit me?"

"Yes—you. Is this yours?" The reporter produced the revolver.

The man ejaculated: "*Ja! Ja!*" and turned to the child with voluble patter. Obediently the youngster dropped back into the cot.

The evident father drew his caller hastily outside, his face indicating fear and a species of stupid braggadocio. He led the way to a public sink down the hall. There, facing the young man, he began: "*Sprechen zie Deutsch?*"

"No, I speak plain American."

"Me, too. Vere you get heem?" He pointed to the revolver.

"Where you left it; in the park. I want you to tell me what you were doing with it there. Come. Speak up."

The man hung his head.

"If you want me to save you from the law you had better tell the truth. Were you going to kill yourself with it?"

The man clapped his hand over the reporter's mouth, hissing: "Ssh! Not so loud. My baby, my Rosa hear! I tell, but you promise one t'ing. Rosa never know."

"Very well. I promise."

The man seemed so overwhelmed with relief that he promptly subsided into dumbness. Several times he opened his mouth as if he honestly desired to speak, but could not.

He leaned against the side of the wall for support, and, in dumb show, begged for patience. In his hand he still clasped the newspaper in which the revolver had been wrapped.

The reporter grew impatient.

"Answer," he demanded; "did you go to the park this morning to shoot yourself? Come. The truth. Did you?"

The man dropped his head in assent.

"Why did you change your mind?"

For answer the man thrust forth the newspaper he held and pointed to an item on an inside page. The reporter read:

> The Grand Lodge of the Mystic Order of Mahatma announces that no more insurance can be paid to beneficiaries of the members of the order due to the application to the court for relief from insolvency. This decision takes effect to-day.

Swiftly the reporter began to comprehend.

"You are a member of this lodge?" he asked.

The workman nodded and then gave way to an emotional reaction. He sobbed, with his head in his arms.

The reporter was insistent.

"When did you last pay dues?" he asked.

"Las' mont'. Dey collect to-morrow!"

After a pause the workman passionately insisted: "Y'understand?"

"How much insurance did you have?"

"Von t'ousand tollar."

"Ah! A thousand dollars, which would lapse to-morrow, so you were going to shoot yourself to-day, but you saw this notice in the paper in which you carried the revolver that the Mystic Order had suspended payment, so shooting yourself would have meant no money gain to your beneficiary. Is that it?"

"*Ja! Ja!*" The workman nodded.

"And your daughter, Rosa, was the beneficiary?"

"*Ja!* I mean, yes."

"Where is your wife?"

"Dead—six mont'."

"What was the matter? No work?"

"*Ja!* I mean, yes."

"Where did you get this revolver?" The reporter kept on, as if unconvinced. The workman rallied in an attempt to prove the truth of his story. He hung on the young man's arm.

"I tell you, mister," he blurted out, "ev'yt'ing. Dis time he has been like hell. No work. No money. No eat. No rent. My Rosa no eat. I pawn ev'yt'ing. Saturday my wife's veddin' ring. She is my last. Den I buy dem gun. It look better for me to bump off. Dead I'm good vor von t'ousand tollar to Rosa; alive no good. Uncle Ike he wrap gun in paper. I not take out before I come by park. You see, now. I tell trut'!"

The reporter seemed unconvinced.

"You are not telling me all," he objected. "I saw you read that item—the knockout that made even suicide useless to you—and yet you were instantly elated. You shouted and ran. I can understand the running back to Rosa, but why the shout of delight?"

A strange light came into the face of the workman.

"Ah! Dat fortune teller!" He smiled, enigmatically.

The reporter was mystified. "What fortune teller?"

"Now, mister, I tell all," the workman resumed, with more aplomb, "for long my Rosa she say, 'papa, all girls get fortunes told. Why can't I get fortune told?' But when I'm broke I cannot buy fortune for Rosa. Den ven I buy dem gun and we get eats I got fifty cents left. Rosa say once more, 'papa, why can't I get fortune?' Why not, I say to mineself; if I give my life I can give my last fifty cents for Rosa's fortune. So she takes me to fortune teller, and he tells her. It was very good fortune—fine! She get money, good husband, long life. Den he tell me story—dat vas it—"

The stolid, stupid, honest old eyes glowed with the recollection. "Oh! Dat story!" he exclaimed, and stopped, abashed.

"What story?" demanded the mystified reporter.

Instead of answering the workman fumbled in his pockets and finally produced a soiled card, which he thrust into the hands of his inquisitor, explaining, "Hees card!"

The reporter read:

AYEEB SAREEF
Dealer in Ladies Fine Wear
1585½ Custer St.
Cincinnati, Ohio
Fortunes;—50 Cts.

"What was the story?" the reporter repeated.

"Dot story he make me yump in der park ven I read in der paper der Order she go bust!"

"But what—what is the story?"

The workman shook his head hopelessly, striving to convey some wonder beyond his powers of expression.

"Isn't this place on Custer Street around the corner?" The reporter demanded.

"Sure—two block."

"Then I'll go there and get this story and come back and see you—and Rosa. Will you wait for me?"

"Sure, mister—sure. You see I tell trut'!"

II.

AYEEB, of course, the reporter thought, would be some greasy old faker, probably a woman, in a foul, cheap, back room. Instead, he found a narrow shop in which with scrupulous exactness was arrayed a line of inexpensive underwear for women;—silk hosiery, 99 cents; silkinine combinations, $1.63; corsets, 89 cents, *et cetera.*

A little weazened old man, of sallow complexion, and wearing a red fez, admitted that he was the proprietor, Ayeeb Sareef. Yes, he told fortunes—a palm reading for fifty cents, a horoscope composed from the date of birth, one dollar; a psychic reading, including a trance and the unveiling of the future, for five dollars.

He remembered the workman with the little girl and the reading of the night before. Did he tell a story with the reading? Yes. What was the story?

Ayeeb Sareef smiled, a smile the reporter set down as the guileful smile of casual trade.

"My friend," said the old man, whose English was scrupulously correct, "the story is told only with a reading, and only to those who are in need of it."

"'In need of it?' What do you mean?"

"Those who, as your American slang has it, are all in, at the end of their rope—ready to kick the bucket. The story has come down by word of mouth in my family for over a thousand years. It has accomplished great good in this world, as much good as any single chapter of the Koran, save only those sacred chapters dedicated to the Prophet!"

The reporter produced his last half dollar, the piece he had been saving for a meal to give him strength to write his story when he got it. With a species of desperation he offered it.

"There!" he cried. "Now tell me!"

Calmly Ayeeb Sareef took the silver piece, rang up "fifty cents" on the cash register, and turned to sell a pair of stockings, after which he turned to the reporter, saying, "Let me see your hand."

"It's the story I want," the reporter objected; "hurry! Please!"

Ayeeb Sareef shook his head.

"The story has never been sold," he explained, patiently. "It is given to those who need it. The old workman was in need. I sold the child the reading, but I gave him the story. The Sareefs are Arabs who know that wisdom cannot be sold, and can be imparted only to the wise."

Baffled, angry, the reporter was about to cry out in desperate protest at the shabby trick which had deprived him of his last coin, when he needed food, but a benignancy in the Arab's face changed his tactics.

Instead, he implored: "Well, Sareef, I need it. I need it badly. Take it from me. That's straight. If I don't get that story I'm in as bad a pickle as the Dutchman. Come! Spill it!"

The timbre of the eager voice, as well as the words, were convincing. "Very well," said the old man, "sit down."

Thus Ayeeb Sareef, descended from an Arabian family once resident in Bagdad, so he said, on that drizzly morning in the cheap underwear shop, interrupted occasionally by women who wanted to wear silk next their skins for less than a dollar, told the story.

III.

In olden times, in Bagdad, there lived a great merchant, the richest in the land. In trade he was the cunning master of all; far-seeing, adroit, yet honest.

Each spring this merchant journeyed across the Euphrates into Persia to purchase the flocks of sheep driven down for his inspection. Under the saddle of his mount he always carried a bag of gold for payment for the sheep, it being an axiom of his trade that the best profit comes to him who buys for cash and sells for credit.

One spring, accompanied as usual by his servant, the merchant, after camping for the night, discovered when on the march again that his bag of gold was gone. They returned along the main traveled highway, beaten broad with the tracks of many donkeys and camels, until they reached the ford of the River Euphrates. There, plainly, in the mud by the bank of the river, the merchant saw his bag of gold trodden by the hoofs of many beasts, but intact.

Then the servant of the great merchant beheld a puzzling sight, one destined to perplex him for months and years. There, in the sight of every passer by, the great merchant of Bagdad, the richest man of his time, prostrated himself in the most abject posture of abasement, tears coursing down his cheeks, while in most piteous accents he implored Allah to spare him.

The servant was too respectful to inquire as to the meaning of this strange spectacle, but recovered the gold. Presently they journeyed on.

Swiftly now came a change in the fortunes of the great merchant. The sheep he bought in Persia were swallowed in a simoon. The slave girls of his harem escaped one night and left him without a concubine. The caliph took his palace for unpaid taxes. Shortly, from being the richest, he became one of the poorest of men.

The servant early saw the trend of events and begged to be allowed to leave his master. Permission was granted. For many years he had been saving and he invested his little fortune in a tavern in one of the suburbs to which he retired.

One night, after many years, the tavern keeper, hearing a commotion in the road, rushed out. In the shadows he saw a lone traveler fighting with assailants who presently leaped over a near-by hedge and escaped, leaving the unknown prostrate in the dusty road.

Even as he advanced the tavern keeper was halted by a curious sight. The outraged stranger leaped exultantly to his feet, and then it could be seen that those who had assailed him had denuded him of his clothes. He stood—naked—and cried aloud ecstatically, for a moment; then swiftly knelt and bowed in prayer to Allah!

The prayer finished, he subsided.

The tavern keeper came forward, lifted up the unfortunate victim, and helped him inside to a couch by the fire. He covered him with a shawl and gave him a drink. The eyes of the unfortunate slowly opened.

The old servant recognized his erstwhile master.

In former years the respect due the status of the great merchant had not permitted the servant to ask questions, but now their positions seemed almost reversed. Accordingly, after the former master had been plied with food and drink, and was clothed again, the one time servant was emboldened to inquire: "Do you remember that night by the Euphrates when we traveled back to find your gold?"

"Indeed, I do," replied the merchant.

"Then and ever since and now," continued the respectful servant, "I have wondered why you abased yourself by dropping into the mud on your face, and imploring Allah? Would you enlighten one who is always honored in serving you?"

"Yes, my friend," replied the merchant, "my gold, you will remember, was where I had dropped it accidentally, in the open road, spurned by the hoofs of countless caravans. Scores must have seen and passed it by. As by a flash of lightning I saw there the end to my good fortune. If my gold, the basis of all I had, was to be spurned like that, then surely Allah intended to frown upon me.

"In that instant I saw, before any one else, the destiny Allah was preparing for me. I was the richest man in the land. I was at the peak of worldly fortune and could go no farther up. Hence I could go only down. Though I lamented, though I protested, it was of no avail, as you know."

The old servant bowed his head before the subtle wisdom of his revered master.

"By a similar token just now," continued the composed traveler, "here in the road before your hospitable tavern, whence you have rescued me from the cudgels of thieves, I again saw the hand of Allah!"

"But how?" gasped the servant.

Their old positions seemed regained. The master was suave, poised, alert as with a subtle control of all the forces of life; the former servant blinked in stupid, but dutiful submission.

"Reflect!" went on the master, at ease in his borrowed garments. "As I came a moment since along your road, ignorant that you were here, my sole worldly possessions were the rags on my back; I lacked even sandals. Then robbers beset me, stripped me of my rags, and left me, naked and dying, unidentified, in the public road.

"In that instant Allah appeared to me. Again he had altered the direction of my path; a second time he had interfered in my destiny. I saw it clearly and returned the just thanks due. I had gone to the bottom of the road; there was nothing more for me to suffer. Henceforth my path could be only up!"

The faithful servant wept.

"Again," he exclaimed, "I comprehend why you have been the greatest in Bagdad. It is that swift insight preceding the vision of all other men which permits you to know the ways of Allah before the common mind can grasp them. Command me, dear master. Myself and all I have are yours!"

IV.

AYEEB SAREEF was done. He turned to tell a woman who had just entered the shop the price of a pair of corsets.

"Is *that* the story?" the young man commented, disappointed.

The little old man in the red fez looked at him quizzically and then said: "The moral of the tale comes when one needs it—like an ointment which searches out the sore while you sleep and heals without a trace."

Whereupon he began bargaining with two girls who wanted a concession in price if they bought two pairs at the same time.

Abruptly the reporter returned to the tenement. It was deserted. The janitor said his late tenants had gone half an hour since. They had left no address. Unemployed workmen were wandering around plentifully just then; how could he be expected to keep track of one, especially of one who owed for a week's lodging and who left without paying?

At one o'clock, the reporter received, at first, flattering attention from the city editor. As he told of the interruption to the apparent act of suicide the editor exclaimed, "My hunch was right! Go on!"

Presently the reporter was repeating the tale of Ayeeb Sareef. But the editor interrupted with, "Cut that out! Tell me about the German workman and the girl. You have them, of course. Where are they?"

The reporter confessed his loss.

"If you haven't the man, don't know his name, can't produce his picture, what does it all amount to? We don't publish fiction. I told you you would have to authenticate every fact—"

"If you'd only listen to this Oriental tale—"

The editor exploded, crying: "What the hell does Cincinnati care about the Orient? We want a crime prevented or a criminal caught by the *Banner*. You're just another dumb-bell. Now get out!"

A moment later the reporter stood dejectedly on the street before the *Banner* office. He moved to the corner of the near-by alley and leaned unhappily against the bricks. His hand, straying to his pocket, came in contact with a revolver. He drew it forth and looked at it curiously.

"I didn't *imagine* that," he muttered, "this gun!"

Conscious of people passing and that some one might think it strange if he was seen there in mid-day bearing a revolver, he slipped into the alley to look at it more carefully. It was an old naval weapon of the hammerlock variety, with five loads.

For a moment his mind wrestled with the sinister suggestion that he turn the gun on himself. He was faint from lack of food, without a cent, his last prospect for a job gone, a nonentity, a failure, and apparently devoid of the necessary qualities for his chosen work.

Even as this gloom settled on him, along a twin lobe of his brain sped the memory of Ayeeb Sareef, and his silky voice—"Allah appeared to me—there was nothing more for me to suffer—I was at the bottom of the valley—henceforth my path could be only up—for I could go no farther down . . . And the great merchant naked in the roadway, let forth a mighty shout!"

Perhaps his long abstinence from food had rendered him giddy. Something beyond his conscious knowledge caused the young man to thrust his arms aloft and shout, while his eyes glittered as with a strange ecstasy.

At the same instant, fifty feet down the alley and across it, a crouching man was throwing a rifle to his shoulder and drawing a bead on a window of the second floor just above the head of the forlorn young reporter.

The shout disconcerted him and he faltered in his aim. He fired at the interloper, and the shot spattered against a brick a few inches above the latter's ear.

The reporter had to drop his gun but six

inches. As the reporter's gun came down he pulled the trigger—and again—and again.

And fainted!

The alley boiled over. Out of the *Banner* press-room, a few feet away, came grimy printers. From the floor above reporters, and the city editor. And out of the street bluecoats—and the reserves.

A seven column head presently proclaimed: "Sniper Captured by the *Banner!*"

"Maniac who has terrorized Cincinnati for a week taken red-handed, under its own office, by a member of the *Banner's* staff."

"Was about to shoot city editor who denounced him."

"Brilliant capture by daring reporter."

The article went on to say:

> At one seventeen this afternoon a newcomer to the staff of the *Banner*, who had been assigned to this duty by the editors of the paper, and whose triumph was the culmination of a spectacular piece of detective work, shot, disarmed and captured the mysterious sniper who has instituted a reign of terror in the city for more than seven days—
>
> —will receive the reward of two thousand dollars offered by the City Council and will henceforth be a featured member of the staff of the *Banner*.

THE END

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SAY IT WITH A SMILE

I'M a mild an' friendly hombre—
That is, when I'm treated mild—
But I'm meaner than a grizzly,
When I happens tuh be riled,
So, be careful what yuh calls me;
If yuh calls me names that rile,
Do it with a grin that's friendly;
Say it with a friendly smile!

When yuh looks at me, look easy!
If there's lightnin' in yer eye,
It's plum' likely that one of us
Is about to up an' die!
When yuh speaks tuh me, speak softly,
Fer I likes the gentle style,
But rough words won't hurt my feelin's,
If yuh says 'em with a smile!

Yuh kin call me all the mean names
In the dictionary book,
If I knows yuh means it friendly—
An' I'll know it by yer look—
But, I'm tellin' yuh, fer safety,
Keep rememberin', all the while,
When yuh says them words, jest say 'em
With a warm an' friendly smile!

Any other style o' speakin',
'Cept in friendliness an' fun,
Is a sign yuh'd best be reachin'
Sort o' pronto, fer yer gun,
Fer ol' Betsey, in my holster,
Shore admires tuh have me file
Frequent notches on her bar'l,
Which, I does it—*with a smile!*

Tom Withrow.

Roll Your Own

By EDGAR FRANKLIN

Author of "Poker Faces," "Suitable for Framing," etc.

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PARTS I and II

YOUNG Mr. and Mrs. James Cranning borrow the automobile of Mr. and Mrs. Fred Budlong, and wreck it. When James goes over to Budlong's at nearly midnight to make some explanation about the car, he finds Mrs. Budlong alone, terrified by a burglar scare. In succeeding complications he is hidden in a closet for hours in the Budlong home while a posse searches the place, and is shot at when he leaves the house. Eluding pursuit, he reaches his home safely, only to find his wife, Dorothy, ready to divorce him because she has found out that Mrs. Budlong was home alone when James reached there hours before. The next morning Mrs. Budlong secretly brings James her jewels to hide, as she had to tell a burglar story to the posse; finding this out increases Dorothy's ire. As the Crannings are facing each other furiously, in comes Fred Budlong with a look on his face that makes Dorothy shriek in terror!

CHAPTER XI.

THE EASY-GOING ONE.

IN an instant James Cranning's eyes widened, and his ears pricked up.

He had risen, with some faint idea of going forward to greet the rather noisy guest. Well, now he stood just as he was! If that cry of Dorothy's meant anything at all, there was no need of hurrying forward to meet Mr. Fred Budlong. They'd meet soon enough!

"Jim here?" Irma's husband demanded.

"Yes, but—Fred!"

"What?"

Little Mrs. Cranning caught her breath with a gasp. After all, perhaps her love for James was of the kind that survives even death!

"Don't—don't blame Jimmy too much, Fred," she contrived. "Irma—"

"I understood that." came too, too readily from Mr. Budlong. "I'm not blaming him any more than I'm blaming Irma, but—"

He ended in a hard laugh—in a really

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for November 20.

inexcusable laugh, it seemed to Mr. Cranning, as he swayed against the table, and steadied himself.

"Where is he?" Fred Budlong rumbled again.

Well—the game was up now! Look at it as one pleased, the game was up! Mr. Budlong had heard, from the neighbors doubtless, and he had drawn Dorothy's own conclusions. So be it, then, since there seemed no other way for it to be conveniently.

James Cranning, really a model young person, was perched up here on the wrong angle of the triangle, with the exquisitely fine probability that Mr. Budlong had dropped in for the sole purpose of shooting him down! Perchance he had slaughtered pretty Irma before coming here? Perchance—well, here he was, at all events, the outraged husband!

Mr. Cranning summoned what might well be his final earthly smile as he stared at Mr. Budlong.

The latter, usually so lazy and good-natured, looked exactly as James had always fancied a man in his position might look. His eye was hard, and so was his breathing; little beads were on his forehead, and his rather loose, amiable mouth was compressed! All in all, nobody could have looked much less like the ordinary Mr. Budlong than did Mr. Budlong himself at this minute.

Dorothy, her hands clasped tight together, her cheeks snowy in their whiteness, was just behind as Budlong stopped and stared at James.

"As—ah—to blaming Irma—" James began, as suavely as possible.

"Never mind Irma!" Frederick puffed. "You—"

"Well, as for me," said James, and his smile grew impudent, and he folded his arms, "I guess I can take all that's coming to me!"

Dorothy winced. James only stood a little straighter. As well, you see, if one must die, to go out with a dashing, impudent smile like this. Although James could not hold this one much longer. Since it must be, he wished that Mr. Budlong would get on with his shooting, and have it over. Instead of hauling out his weapon and firing, however, Mr. Budlong placed his big hands on his hips, and snapped:

"All right. Where is it?"

"Huh?" said James.

"Where is it?"

"Where's what?" faltered James.

"Well, what do you suppose I'm talking about?" the caller demanded with equal amazement. "Where's my car?"

"Oh!" said James, and although he had not at all intended to do this, he sat down. "The—car!"

Budlong gazed at him in blank astonishment, and then turned about, and considered Dorothy; and after that, as it appeared, took some account of himself. And the glare left his eye, and the tightness his mouth, and Mr. Budlong smiled a peculiar sheepish, worried smile.

"Say!" cried a voice much more like his own. "I didn't mean to scare the wits out of you both, but—I tell you, I've been working night and day lately, and I'm just all in. I'm full of twitches, and it seems to me that I've been getting mad at some one every few minutes these last hours."

"Er—everybody's like that sometimes," James said weakly, and waved a shaky, friendly hand. "Sit down, Fred."

"Sure!" said Mr. Budlong, and sat down; and thereupon he sent in James's direction as odd a glance as ever had reached that individual. Just one lightning, suspicious dart it was, black and furious—and then Budlong was smiling again! "It's nerves, y' know—overwork—all that! I just seem to fly off the handle for no reason at all. Why, when Irma told me she'd lent you that car—"

"You were angry, of course," Dorothy sighed. "Why shouldn't you be?"

"Here, now! I—I wasn't legitimately angry, Dot," Mr. Budlong said, almost tenderly it seemed to James! "Lord! You know me well enough to know that I'd never begrudge you anything. Only I—I'm sort of attached to that car."

"It really isn't badly broken," Dorothy said piteously. "Just the—"

"Just one of the teeth on that gear down—" James supplied.

"Yes. So Irma said. Why, I'm not

worrying about how badly it's broken. Wouldn't matter if—well, I'm not worrying about that, of course."

Mr. Budlong laughed. He cleared his throat noisily. And in James's quieting brain, interest in this gentleman was waxing by the second. He had never seen Budlong's eyes shift around like that before; he had never seen Budlong drum on the sides of his chair with his fingers; nor had he ever heard Budlong converse in this disconnected fashion.

"Well, what are you worrying about?" escaped James.

"Huh? What d'ye mean by that?" the caller rasped.

"Well, just—just—" James stammered, for the man was favoring him with a glare no less than fiendish!

"All right—didn't mean to yell at you like that, old man—nerves!" he said lucidly, and the fiendish glare was gone! "Only—I wanted to see that car to-morrow. Matter of fact, I have to use it to-morrow."

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" Dorothy breathed.

"Nonsense!" grinned Mr. Budlong. "I thought I'd hop on one of the evening trains and go get it myself. That's all."

"You can't!" James said quickly.

"No train, eh? All right; I'll hire another car, and drive out. Where—"

"That's not what I meant. The car won't be ready to-night, or to-morrow, either, Fred. I'm horribly sorry, but the—the garage man has to send to New York for a whole new gear. He'll run in for it himself in the morning—he said he would."

On and on drummed Mr. Budlong's fingers.

"Hum — well — say, Jim!" said he. "Probably he's got something around the shop that he can stick in for a makeshift?"

"He hasn't," James sighed. "He hunted the whole garage over while we were there. He went over the regular stock, and the scrap heaps, and everything. Didn't he, Dot?"

"Yes," murmured Dorothy, with an effort. "He did."

"And there wasn't one solitary thing in the way of a gear that would come anywhere near fitting, or even that could be made to fit," James pursued very earnestly. "He must have tried a dozen, and there wasn't one within a mile of fitting. Was there, Dot?"

"No," said Dorothy, "there wasn't."

"So, while I'm horribly sorry, old man, we'll have to—"

"Confound it—don't tell me again that you're sorry! I understand that you're sorry. What good does that do?" Budlong shouted, incredibly irascible for an instant—and at once smiling again. "Er—where did you break down?"

James's hand waved sweepingly.

"'Way east of here?"

"Huh? China? Japan?"

"No—out near New London," James laughed.

"Oh! You got the car into New London?"

"No. We—we had her towed into a little village."

"And?"

"And she's still there, of course," James sighed.

"Well, I understand that, too!" Mr. Budlong cried. "What I want to know is, where the car is? What's the name of the town? It's not a secret, is it?"

"Er—no, of course not," James laughed again, although this laugh lacked heartiness. "It was—ah—well, now, isn't that funny! It was right on the tip of my tongue, and now it's slipped away. Dot, what was the name of that village?"

Momentarily Mrs. Cranning's eyes glinted at her husband.

"Er—wasn't it some Corners? Was it Potter's Corners?"

"Um—no, that doesn't sound just like it," James said very thoughtfully. "It was Corners of some kind, but—"

"Well, look at your slip!"

"What slip?"

"The receipt you took for the car, of course. That 'll have the name of the town and the name of the proprietor, Jim. Say, it isn't possible that you left the car without taking a receipt, is it?"

Did James crumple before this question? Oh, no; a certain desperate steadiness had now become part of James Cranning. Easily and naturally he looked at Mr. Budlong, and laughed.

"Why, Fred, this little garage never spent ten cents for printed stationery of any kind since it started," he said. "I doubt very much if they have even a printed billhead, far less receipt forms, or—"

"I'm not asking you about their printed matter, Jim. I'm asking if you took a receipt for my car?"

"No, I did not," Mr. Cranning smiled, still unperturbed. "You'll understand why, if you ever see the place. Oldish chap, you know. Runs it with his son. Typical New Englanders—honest as the day is long. Don't you worry a second about the car, Fred!"

He smiled very reassuringly. Mr. Budlong, hands upon his knees, stared at him with the same indescribable intensity for a moment, and then tried to smile.

"I'm—not so much worried about—Jim, what was the name of this garage?"

"I give it up!" said James. "Do you remember its name, Dot?"

"No," that lady said simply.

"Look here! This is getting too vague!" said Mr. Budlong. "Why—"

"Zenith!" James cried triumphantly. "That's it—the Zenith Garage!"

"Aha!" said Mr. Budlong, and arose. "Zenith Garage, Potter's Corners. Is that right?"

"No, it wasn't Potter's Corners," said James. "Fred, you're not thinking of starting for there to-night? The car's not ready."

Mr. Budlong controlled himself.

"Whether I'll start for there or not, I don't know. I suppose I may be allowed to know where my car is, though? If it's not Potter's Corners, what is it?"

"Sims Corners!" James excitedly exclaimed, since it was quite plain that he must exclaim something of a pretty definite nature. "That's it. Sims Corners."

"All right," said Budlong. "May I use your phone?"

"Why not? But—"

"Much obliged," the caller said rather tartly, and strode down the room to the stand in the corner. "Gimme long distance!"

"You—you going to phone out there?" James asked.

"Yes. Find out if I can go for the car to-night, and—"

"Oh, but I insist on going for it," said Mr. Cranning. "I couldn't think of letting you—"

"Hello, long distance," Budlong grunted. "I want the Zenith Garage at Sims Corners, Connecticut. I want to talk to the proprietor."

Then he waited patiently, and James pondered afresh and with great speed. Since there was no such place as Sims Corners, it could not well contain a Zenith Garage. Shortly, the courteous lady operator would present these facts for Budlong's consideration, and then—"

"Now, old man!" James protested. "You hang up that receiver, and let me attend to that car. No, I won't even think of having you go to all that trouble when the blame's all mine. Hang her up, Fred."

"Hello!" barked Mr. Budlong, instead of complying. "All right." And he smiled at the somewhat startled James, and added: "That's good service, Jim; that was a quick connection, wasn't it? I—Hello! Zenith Garage?"

"That's right!" a voice scraped out, all too plainly.

"At Sims Corners?"

"Sure thing!" said the voice. "What can I do for you?"

Mr. Budlong cleared his throat and settled down.

"You have a car of mine in your shop being fixed. She broke down to-day, and you towed her in. I want to know—"

"What?" said the voice.

"I say you have a—"

"I heard you the first time. You've got the wrong place, mister. We haven't taken in a repair job in three weeks."

"What's that?"

"Ain't lifted a wrench in all that time—nope. My man broke his leg and I got my hand mashed in a—"

"*Wait!*" cried James Cranning, and he bounced from his chair, laughing very boisterously, and hurried to Mr. Budlong's side. "You're talking to the wrong town, Fred. I've got it at last—*Grimm's* Corners!"

"But this man—"

"Of course he doesn't know anything about it. Ring off."

Mr. Budlong rang off. He also stared at James.

"Say, what's the matter with you?" he demanded bluntly. "How could you make a mistake like that?"

"How? Well, Fred, if you'd seen us when it happened, you'd know. I didn't tell this to Irma, but we went off the road like a cannon ball and we landed in the middle of a field. I was so plumb scared that I was shaking even when we got back here. Wasn't I, Dot?"

"You've done some shaking," said his wife.

"And as for when we were out in that little village—why, I didn't know my own name, Fred! I just shook and shook and shook and— Oh, by the way, there's no telephone in the garage!"

"How'd you get his towing car to come for you?"

"A lot of cars stopped to see if we were killed, of course. One of 'em sent him back to us."

Mr. Budlong ceased his narrow-eyed study of his friend, and returned to the telephone.

"Long distance again, please. . . . Hello, long distance. Made a mistake a minute ago. It's Grimm's Corners, Connecticut, I want—Zenith Garage. If there isn't a phone in the garage, ask the operator up there who owns the place, and see if he has one in his house."

He scowled and waited. James also waited. The lumbering fool! He should have accepted James's word! Now the operator would find a Grimm's Corners for him, and—

"What? Of course there's such a place! I have a car there being fixed," said Budlong. "What? . . . Well, wait a minute. Jim!"

"Yes?"

"She says it may be listed under the name of the nearest town. What's that?"

"I don't know!"

"Well, you went through a town before you got there, didn't you? What was it?"

"We didn't go through one, Fred. We just stuck to back roads all day."

"Well, haven't you any idea of what it's near?"

"Fred, if it would save my neck, I could not tell you the name of a town within forty miles of the place," Mr. Cranning said with apparently genuine regret. "I can drive straight from here into the garage, but no—I really don't know what town it's near."

"Hell!" grunted Mr. Budlong, as he replaced the receiver and once more fastened his gaze on James. "Drive me there, then. I'll borrow a car."

"To-night?" James gasped.

"No, he'd be closed, I suppose," Budlong reflected bitterly. "We'll start about five in the morning. I'll get Sayles's car."

"Can't!" James said.

"Dammit! You've got to!" Mr. Budlong roared amazingly and stood up—and instantly relaxed again.

"Fred, to-morrow morning I can't!" said James. "I've got two appointments—"

"Break 'em!"

"It would cost me thousands, literally! Here's what I will do, though. I'll wire the old boy in the morning, before I go to the city, to send a man in on the very first train for the gear. Then I'll get the gear myself, and meet him at the station. And in the afternoon I'll take another train out there—"

"When you don't even know what town it's near?"

"I can find out from the man who comes in for the gear, can't I?" James inquired glibly. "And in that way I'll have the car back here for you before midnight, sure. Gosh, I'm sorry it ever happened, old man. I'm sorry to get you all worked up like this."

"Worked up! Who says I'm worked up?" Budlong snapped.

"Why, nobody, but—"

"Well, maybe I am—maybe I am," muttered the visitor. "It—it's nerves and—and I'm full of twitches. I think I'll run along home now and try to get some sleep."

"No, no!" James protested. "Sit down awhile, and—"

"If he is tired, let the poor boy go home

and get some sleep," Dorothy said distinctly.

Even then, brows knitting, big teeth biting oddly at his under lip, Fred Budlong was on his way to the door. James followed him to the veranda—and there, as the door swung after them, Budlong wheeled about suddenly and gripped James by both lapels.

"Maybe it's—it's all so!" he growled. "But—"

"Hey?"

"Well, you get that car back here before to-morrow night—exactly as it was when you took it!" Budlong shrieked.

"Well, yes, I—"

"As it was!" Mr. Budlong repeated; and, for one violent second, shook the person of James Cranning.

Then he turned and hurried away into the Sunnyvale night. James followed his swift progress as far as the corner, and then slowly made his own way back to the pretty living room and the very important job which had been so unfortunately interrupted. He found Dorothy gazing at him with plain distaste.

"Fred acts darned funny to-night, doesn't he?" Mr. Cranning commented. "He surely acts as if he was going completely crazy!"

Lips curling, Dorothy shrugged delicately.

"Why shouldn't he go crazy?"

"Why should he, kid?"

"Because Irma may have other Jimmies besides you. Fred may have heard about them. And don't call me kid, please. Fred's too big and clean to have any real idea of such values—yet."

James flushed slightly.

"Say! You're quite stuck on that big, overfed lobster, aren't you?" he asked.

"What?" Mrs. Cranning asked crisply.

It was a line of attack, James noted instantly, which was really—curiously, perhaps—unwise.

"I wish I'd told him the truth about his hellish car!" he snapped.

"And have him wave it away as unimportant? Have Fred make you a present of two thousand dollars? Have him patronize you—and me?" cried Mrs. Cranning, who seemed to have some firmly fixed impressions of Mr. Budlong. "If you had dared!"

"He didn't look to me like a man who was waving anything away to-night!" said James.

"No?" Mrs. Cranning said without interest, and selected several sections of the paper, and arose. "You get him another car before to-morrow night, do you hear?"

"I'm going to do that and— Wait, Dot!"

"Wait for what, pray?"

"I just want you to sit down and let's have this fool thing out now to a finish—just you and me, honey!"

"Do you—is it possible that you still mean to try your story on me?" the girl cried with round-eyed incredulity. "After that exhibition?"

"Huh? What exhibition?"

"Of how you can lie, of course!" Dorothy answered with utter contempt, and turned away from him. "Why, Jim, the lies slipped from your tongue with such absolute ease that once or twice I almost believed them myself."

"Well, was I lying for the fun of the thing?" young Mr. Cranning demanded hotly. "Who started all this mess? Wasn't I lying for your sake more than I was for mine?"

"Oh!" said Dorothy disgustedly, and moved on to the stairs, and then up the stairs.

"That's no answer!" roared from the suffering soul of her husband. "Do you mean that you won't let me tell the truth because I lied so well to somebody to spare your feelings?"

"Ugh!" said Mrs. Cranning.

"Well, 'ugh' may be all right in its way, but it doesn't make sense here!" James submitted rather wildly. "Dot—wait! Is there something about this that I don't understand? Has somebody been saying or doing something that I don't—"

Here he really choked. As concerned sounds, he might have been choking to death. But Dorothy never heeded. Upstairs, the guest-chamber door closed and was locked. James sat down, and shook his head, and shook it, and shook it. He

was beginning to understand, he sensed; she who had loved him so dearly now had learned to hate him!

CHAPTER XII.

FUNDS AND INVESTMENT.

THE young man with the persuasive manner, and the highly polished hair —James had noted him many times, posing in the show window—was just opening his automobile agency for the day when Mr. Cranning appeared. The young man smiled benignly, too; for business rarely rushed in so early Monday morning, and James bore every earmark of a gentleman who was bent on business.

Nor had he of the highly polished hair ever seen a man sell himself a car in so breath-takingly expeditious a fashion! Young Mr. Cranning merely pointed at the gray touring model across the store, and said:

"That's your Cyclone Six, isn't it?"

"It is."

"How much?" asked James.

"Nineteen-ninety, including freight and tax," replied the salesman, for where briskness demanded it he could be as brisk as any man.

"All right, I want it," said Mr. Cranning.

"Fine!" said he of the hair, and took an important-looking little notebook from his pocket, and consulted it. "Now, let's see. I guess I can give you a pretty good delivery on one of those. How'd three weeks from Wednesday do? I can't promise, but I think—"

"Three weeks from what?" James barked. "I can't wait for any delivery. I want that car standing over there. I'll come in for it this afternoon."

"But—"

"It's a cash sale, of course. Well? Car's in running order, isn't it?"

The other regarded him keenly. He was intelligent, despite his hair.

"So far as that goes, she's better than absolutely new," he said. "She's done six or seven hundred miles, demonstrating and one thing and another, and she's just run in nice. But that's our sample of the model, and—"

"Where's your uptown agency?" Cranning asked, as he started for the door.

"Hold on!" beamed the other. "You don't have to go to our other branch, sir. I can get another one of these in a day or two, if you're really rushed for a car. What time would you like to call for her? I'll have her rubbed down, and fresh grease and oil put in."

Just then the lightning buyer was examining the vehicle with keen, fevered eyes. Yes, down to the smallest detail it was the duplicate of the bedeviled collection of machinery that he had borrowed—paint, upholstery, tires, top, and everything. He jerked out his pocket check book, and scribbled rapidly.

"Half past three; maybe earlier," he said. "One hundred do for the deposit? All right. There you are!"

Long after he had vanished, the young man stood near the door of his establishment, gazing expectantly up and down the street.

He had been in that store for five years now, and nothing like this had ever happened before. Even after half an hour of uninterrupted solitude, he still gazed, for the hunch persisted that this was to be his one great day in the automobile business.

James was conscious of at least a little relief.

All the way down in the train a new and ghastly dread had haunted him, gibbering its way back and forth in his troubled brain: the very last car of that particular style would have been sold by every one of the company's agents within fifty miles of New York! Well, that bugaboo hadn't materialized. Perhaps none of the rest of them would amount to much. Perhaps, James reflected bitterly, was right!

He reached his trim little office, nodded to his trim little stenographer, and passed to the small pile of mail in his private sanctum. There was nothing of importance. Some two minutes he sat with hand resting on the telephone, debating whether to call up the hospital, and ask tidings of Mannering. He dared not do it!

So he opened his safe and stowed away the larger of the two packages he had been clutching ever since leaving the house, and heaved another sigh of relief as he closed the door and twirled the knob. Those infernal gems of Irma's were at least relatively safe in there.

Dorothy's trinkets, in the smaller package—oh, there was no need of rushing out madly to dispose of them. One never knows; Providence has a way, now and then, of playing the most delightfully unexpected tricks. Even if it was not yet due, several people did owe James Cranning real money. Who would say with certainty that one, or even all of them might not turn up this morning, and insist on paying?

When the noon whistles began to blow, young Mr. Cranning understood that he himself was the one who could say this with entire certainty; he sighed heavily, for this last hour he had been going farther and farther into the depths.

Dorothy, you see, had deigned to breakfast with him, and a grim and silent and altogether harrowing meal it had been. Dorothy had elected to limit her remarks to one query as to the number of lumps in his coffee, and a request to pass the butter; and James, who had arisen with a headache and no overwhelmingly sweet temper, had responded exactly in kind—for which he was sorry now, of course.

He might better have seized the occasion to reopen his case. Indeed, once at least, he had been on the verge of doing just that and then, glancing at Dot, had held his peace. There had been something queer about Dot—something new and uncomfortable, something darned peculiar, the like of which her husband had never seen before, and—oh, well, this wasn't getting to the pawnshop, was it?

Curiously, perhaps, Mr. Cranning had never seen the inside of a pawnshop.

He was an observant person however, and he knew that the nearest one was three blocks west of the office, and then two blocks north, and a big establishment, too. It was his impression that a Hebraic gentleman with long gray whiskers and a black skull cap would greet him behind a dirty, caged counter, and that there would be a long and humiliating argument from which young Mr. Cranning would emerge with two or three little tickets, and something better than nine hundred dollars in money.

This place, though, altogether noncommittal as to the screened windows in front, had a door on the side street marked "Private Entrance," and through this door James Cranning went swiftly and furtively, for he felt sudden and acute need of all the privacy that might be inducted into a painful situation.

There was nothing terrifying about the room he had entered. It was only a square place, badly illuminated, and not too sweet of atmosphere, with two or three open booths along the walls, and a bald-headed man sitting over there at a desk. Mr. Cranning was rather inclined to think him Irish, although he might equally well have been German, or French, or from Vermont, or North Carolina.

"Got some trinkets for you!" James announced with a jovial laugh, for he had rehearsed this entrance mentally.

"Umum?" said the bald-headed man and arose, unhurried and unsmiling, and switched on the light in a booth.

Silently, he motioned James to a chair. Silently and without emotion he dumped Dorothy's little possessions on the greasy velvet pad before him—Dorothy's! Young Mr. Cranning winced so sharply that the other glanced at him. Then he stuck a loupe in his eye, and examined the gems.

"Family's in—ah—a little financial jam!" James stated.

"I see," said the other.

"Need all we can get on those, you know."

"I see. How much do you want?"

"Oh—call it a thousand dollars on the lot!" Mr. Cranning said, with the air of one quite determined not to impose terms too harsh.

This time the person failed even to see.

He examined further and more carefully. Then, indicating the pieces, he said boredly:

"Three hundred—two fifty—one fifty."

"But that's only seven hundred dollars!" James gasped.

"Yes."

"Oh, but—er—see here! Couldn't—"

"Seven hundred," the other said with a finality that dropped upon James like a pitch-black pall.

"Er—all right!" he sighed.

"Name?"

Again James started slightly. In moments such as this, did one give one's correct name? Well, this one didn't, anyway! Why, if it ever leaked out in certain business circles that the up-and-coming Mr. Cranning was going around pawning his wife's jewels—

"Jordan!" James exclaimed loudly. "Herbert P. Jordan!"

The other scooped up Dorothy's gems, and walked away.

Now what? One waited, apparently. James drummed on the table and watched the door with catlike stare. If some one who knew him came walking in there! If some one happened—ah, the person was returning with three little tickets, and seven one hundred dollar bills in his hand.

James tucked them into his inner vest pocket, and fled. Next, the bank! Five hundred dollars to come out of his poor little account in one lump, which, when his hundred-dollar deposit check had been paid, would leave a balance of just sixty-two dollars!

Young Mr. Cranning braced himself as he entered; this was a big institution, and once in awhile it had the nastiest way of telling people that their business was too small to bother with. Young Mr. Cranning, presently, tottered out with five hundred dollars more in his inner pocket. Nothing had happened.

To be sure, he still lacked six or seven hundred dollars of the car's purchase price. That would have to be arranged, in one way or another. He'd have to give the motor people a note for the balance, and have some responsible person indorse the note. Back in his office again, James grew rather limp with relief, for the main object had been attained; he had exhausted the whole visible supply of money in his personal world, to be sure, but he had enough to get actual possession of the accursed car!

And he was thankful for that. If ever a man was thankful for anything, James Cranning was thankful for that! He sat back, smiling quite naturally indeed, and pondered hard upon just which business friend might most safely be asked to write his name across the back of an insignificant note for eight hundred dollars, and—

"Hel—lo!" said a gentle voice behind him.

Young Mr. Cranning started and turned. It was only Rockford, Sunnyvale's new real estate agent—although what was he doing here? James had not exchanged two dozen words with the man since their first meeting; indeed, he detested the mean-eyed, oily creature, just now glancing about, and laying aside his hat and stick and, without invitation, selecting a chair!

"Met your young lady out there; on her way to lunch, I suppose," he said. "She said you were in."

"She's a truthful girl," said James. "I am."

"Nice place you've got here."

"Oh, yes!"

"Doing pretty well, Cranning?"

"Sure am!" James said enthusiastically, for this attitude was a matter of fixed policy with him during business hours.

"Hands full of profitable business, eh?"

"I'll tell the whole, wide world!" said James.

Twice Mr. Rockford nodded meditatively. Then he stretched his legs.

"Well, I'm glad you're doing so well!" he said heartily.

"Why are you?"

"Because you're probably wondering how to invest your surplus funds, Cranning—and I have the very best proposition you ever examined!"

"Oh!" sighed James.

"A new company, doing a—er—a general business, as one might say."

"It sounds vague."

"It isn't, though!" Mr. Rockford assured him. "I call it 'Rockford.'"

"Inc.?"

"No, just plain Rockford."

He paused. James smiled, and nodded in the most perfunctory way. During the average week he disposed of about one

dozen people who wished him to invest in new companies. He knew the technique. He shook his head firmly, eying Mr. Rockford.

"Not interested!" he said.

"You don't know yet whether you are, or are not," suggested the caller.

"Oh, yes, I do. My funds are all tied up."

"Even so," said Rockford, "one always has a dollar or two for a really good thing, eh?"

"Somebody else, maybe. Not this body. And I'm sorry, Rockford, but I'm pretty busy this afternoon," said James, and half-rose.

Mr. Rockford merely smiled again.

"Might it not be wiser to hear this proposition?"

"Wiser? What does that mean?"

"Gracious! Don't bristle so!" yawned Mr. Rockford. "Er—quite a burglar scare we had out home, early Sunday morning, wasn't it?"

"I heard of it," Mr. Cranning said briefly.

"I know that. I went into Budlong's with some of the fellows, to look around, you know. I—ah, it's hanging over there, isn't it? The hat I saw under the table in Budlong's entry, I mean."

"Hey?" escaped from James.

"Don't shout, old man. You haven't a thing to shout about. I was pretty sure of that hat, because you've been wearing it ever since I came to town; but I dropped my own, so as to have a look at the initials in yours. They were there—J. C.

"And then, later, I tried to open that closet in the upstairs hall, and I couldn't, because you were locked in with the key inside!" He looked straight at James, and shook his head. "Cranning, I'm ashamed of you! In a little community like that, all home folks, all nice people—tut, tut! I might even say, fie!"

Young Mr. Cranning gripped the arms of his chair, and did his level best to look like an infuriated, innocent man about to wreak vengeance on a filthy liar. He must have failed, for Rockford only laughed softly and delightedly.

"I should have gone to Budlong and told him! It was the duty of one straight, square man to another. Indeed, I should have made the whole thing public on the spot, because in a little place like that it's always better to run out the few undesirables, Cranning, and—what were we talking of? Oh, yes, my little company, of course. Old man, there's an investment that's bound to benefit you! I'm letting in a select few on the ground floor. I'm accepting subscriptions now. That's why I dropped in!"

"All—right!" James forced out. "How much?"

"The—er—minimum subscription, you mean, Cranning?"

"Yes, damn you!"

Mr. Rockford merely raised his brows, and smiled. James mastered the quick impulse to leap upon him; later in life, he might well devote a glorious half hour to beating Mr. Rockford into pulp; just now, since he could endure no more varieties of trouble, it was his pretty task to buy Rockford's silence.

Well, he'd been right about the man being a crook, anyway! Now Mr. Rockford would demand, at the very least, one hundred dollars, and more likely two hundred. If he was a particularly assured crook, he might even try to get five hundred—yes, and he might succeed, too, and if he did James Cranning would stand face to face with the task of raising more money, where no money existed, before going for the car, and—

"Why damn me for offering you a fine, clean business proposition?" Rockford asked quietly, and looked him straight in the eye. "I'll—er—let you off easy, if you feel that you must look at the thing in that way."

"Well?" James said not quite so tensely, "How much, then?"

"You skip down to your bank, Cranning, and get me this in cash, because I'm not accepting checks," the caller said briskly. "Get me a thousand dollars!"

"Get you what?" Mr. Cranning gasped.

"One thousand berries, my lad," repeated Rockford with a smile of strange implacability. "And thank your lucky stars that you're dealing with a man who has

heart enough to make the figure as low as that."

"But I—I can't pay you any thousand dollars!"

"No?" smiled Mr. Rockford, and at once arose and secured hat and stick. "Just as you say, old chap. You know your own business best. Good day, Cranning!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE NEW PUZZLE.

AND he was departing, too! He wasn't going to wait and argue the matter, and accept less if he couldn't get his thousand—Rockford was just going! Even now he was in the outer office.

"Rockford! Hold—hold on!" James croaked.

"Eh?" said the visitor, and paused.

"Yes, come back here! I—Rockford, will this thousand dollars shut your filthy mouth about what you think you've discovered?"

Mr. Rockford smiled faintly.

"I never talk about things I think I've discovered, Cranning. I mentioned that little matter of the hat and the closet merely to show you what a thoroughly good sort I am. Were I not, I should have made the whole thing public at once, you know.

"I'm a believer in purity and open, upstanding right living, Cranning; I think the best way to keep a place like our Sunnyvale clean and wholesome is to let every one know exactly what's going on, and—confound it!" Mr. Rockford said ringingly, and with sudden decision. "I'm going to keep right with myself, and do that anyway!"

"I asked you a question," said James.

"So you did," said the visitor and considered. "Well, that's a delicate matter, isn't it? Of course, scandal among the members of a firm never did anything but damage. If you actually were a partner of mine in this new venture, it is very probable that I should have to go against my own conscience, and maintain silence about this—ah—slight indiscretion of yours and Mrs. Fred Budlong's. Yes," sighed Mr. Rockford, and shook his head sadly. "I'll say in so many words that I should feel compelled to say nothing, Cranning."

James's uncertain fingers came out of his vest pocket.

"There!" he gulped.

"Oh! You're coming in, after all?" said Mr. Rockford as he accepted ten one-hundred-dollar bills. "Cranning, you'll never regret it! You—"

"And bear this in mind!" James interrupted hoarsely and remarkably. "If ever you breathe one word, I'll kill you!"

"Ah, but I shall never breathe one word, my dear fellow," laughed the caller. "So don't waste two or three dollars for cartridges on my account. I'm sorry I can't give you a receipt for this, Cranning."

"You go to hell!" shrieked the amazing James.

His vision seemed strangely clouded by a red haze. He rose, his hard fists clenched. He was panting—and now he sat down again heavily. Rockford had whisked out with a final grin; and perhaps that was as well, for although this might be the very first time in his life that James Cranning had paid blackmail, he had done what he could to save the Budlong family from the sort of ruin that had overtaken the Cranning family, and very little would have been gained by stretching Mr. Rockford on the floor!

And now James's thousand dollars was gone! Dorothy's jewels were—just gone! And the chance Mr. Budlong had stood of getting a new car this evening, that was gone too.

Young Mr. Cranning laughed bitterly, but even as he laughed his vision cleared. Instead of a car, Fred would get the simple truth, and the more James thought of this the better he liked the idea.

Whatever unearthly thing had afflicted him yesterday, Fred had had a good long night's sleep and, before this, he was just his old, calm, jolly self. Today, beyond question, the infernal car was not the neurotically life-and-death matter it had been to Fred last night.

In cold fact, the man would simply listen, grinning here and grunting there; and if he showed even a sign of being magnificent and waving the whole thing away

as unimportant, he'd be made to understand that absolutely nothing of the kind could or would be considered. Eventually, James even laughed aloud. Why, that poor old fat boob was the best, and calmest—

"Aha!" cried Frederick Budlong, as he entered suddenly and slammed the door and advanced upon James with four great strides. "Caught you that time!"

"What?" James gasped.

And his heart sunk! This man wasn't just irrational, or tired, or excited; he was plain crazy! His eyes were hot and glittering; his cheeks were red and puffed; standing over James he glowered down, and rasped:

"What was he doing here?"

"Who?"

"None o' that! I saw him getting into the elevator. I mean Rockford, and you know I mean Rockford. Why was he here?"

"Well, Fred, I— I—" James managed, for it seemed fairly clear that a precious thousand dollars had been wasted, and that, even now, Frederick knew.

Still, as he gazed at James, a cooling surge of reason seemed to sweep into Mr. Budlong's disturbed brain. His eyes had been boring through and through James; now, just as that unfortunate young man was about to rise and burst into a defense, the eyes ceased boring, and Mr. Budlong's astonishing tension disappeared! He looked away, and smiled flickeringly!

"Well, probably you—didn't!" he muttered quite lucidly. "I thought for a moment that—oh, well. Never mind!"

Puffing, he straightened up, seeking to compose himself. A certain rage followed James's weak relief.

"Say, do you mind telling me what the devil's the matter with you?" he cried. "What is there about Rockford to excite you?"

Budlong whisked about to face him.

"His business here had nothing to do with me?" he demanded.

"It—no, nothing!" said James flatly.

"Well, that's all I wanted to know," Budlong laughed thickly. "You see, he—he's interested in some property I want badly, and I—I don't trust him, Jim. That's all. Don't mind me. I'm sort of full of twitches!"

"So you said," murmured James, and finally mastered his last fit of trembling. "Anything else on your mind?"

"Only the car, Jim," said Mr. Budlong, and flashed a swift glance upon him.

Young Mr. Cranning's heart sank farther. This was not the placid, genial Frederick he had been visualizing. The car still rested heavily upon his mind, and he was in no condition to hear the truth. For some reason—if the present stare of Mr. Budlong's meant anything—that car had settled down as the pet obsession of his poor brain.

"Get the gear, Jim?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," said James drearily.

"Man come for it?"

"Of course."

"Did he start right back with it?"

"Naturally."

"Did he say just what time the job would be done?"

"Um—no, he didn't."

"But to-day? To-day?" Budlong cried. "Didn't he say to-day?"

"Yes!" James said soothingly. "Some time to-day, of course."

Mr. Budlong's fingers drummed on his chair. He swallowed visibly.

"What train are you going up on, Jim?"

"Oh, there's one at three-thirty, I believe."

"I'm going with you!" Mr. Budlong stated.

"Why, that's not necessary!" James said, with a start.

"Necessary or not, I'm going!"

"But I— I may not be able to make that train. I may have to take a later one, and you wouldn't want to hang around all—"

"I'll be at the Grand Central at quarter past three, and I'll wait by the information desk on the upper level until you get there," ticked from Mr. Budlong.

"But I may be able to—to get an earlier train!" James said wildly.

"Then 'phone me at my office. I'll wait there until half-past two. For that matter, I'll wait right here."

"Oh, but you can't do that, old man," Mr. Cranning said hastily. "I'm awfully

sorry, but I've got some people coming for a conference."

"What time?"

"About—about three!" James answered dizzily.

"Huh?" cried Mr. Budlong, and suddenly thrust out his chin and peered at James. "You have a conference at three—but you may be able to make a train before three! I caught you that time! I caught you lying! Why?"

Hands on his knees, he leaned farther and farther forward, coming ever nearer to Mr. Cranning, and smiling horribly, with teeth bared.

Slowly, cautiously, James braced his feet on the floor as he prepared for the emergency backward push that should send over his chair, and send himself leaping through the office door. For there was now no earthly doubt about Mr. Budlong's mental condition; the trouble was coming to a climax, and the gentleman was about to jump!

"Wait a minute, Fred," Mr. Cranning said very, very quietly. "The conference is at two. You're acting like such a lunatic to-day that you've tangled me all up. Upon my soul, I don't even know what I'm saying! If you'll get some kind of grip on yourself, I'll try to talk rationally."

One instant, Mr. Budlong stared. Then he relaxed, and sat back and, for another instant, pressed his hand to his forehead, and closed his eyes.

"Don't mind me, Jim. I—I know I'm not just myself," he mumbled. "Been hammering pretty hard lately."

"Yes—yes," purred James.

"And another thing, Jim," Budlong said sharply. "There was a time when I trusted people!"

"Ah?"

"Yes, I trusted anybody—I trusted everybody!" the gentleman cried harshly. "But then I found Dot, and I—"

As if he had literally bitten them off, the words ceased!

Mr. Budlong started so perceptibly that the chair moved. Yes, and now he was reddening, suddenly and darkly, and quite failing to face James! The latter stared his warranted astonishment.

"Yes; Dot and you did what?"

"What?" grunted Mr. Budlong.

"What were you saying about Dot?"

"I wasn't saying anything about Dot!" stated the visitor, and gazed fixedly at James.

"Why, you said—"

"I said I didn't trust anybody—and I don't," Budlong snapped. "I said I used to trust everybody, and then I found it was rot, and I quit—something like that. Is that what you mistook for Dot?"

"Possibly," murmured Mr. Cranning. "But I certainly thought—"

The unfortunate man gazed out of the window.

"Well, whatever you thought, that's what I said," he muttered. "Say, Jim! Can't you cut out the other things, and meet me at quarter past three for that train?"

An instant, James considered. At the very worst, there are always plenty of police about a great railroad terminal to look after the lone, unhappy stranger suddenly become violent.

"All right, I will!" he said heartily. "At the information desk."

"That's settled?" Budlong demanded with a swift glance.

"Absolutely settled!"

"You'll be there sure?"

"I sure will!" James laughed.

Now, weirdly as he seemed to do everything else these days, Mr. Budlong permitted himself one long, last stare, and abruptly turned limp. Strangely, fishily he gazed at James, and smiled.

"Well, that's fine—much obliged," he mumbled. "One good thing about you, Jim; you're sort of open-faced. I mean, if you were lying to a man, he'd know it in a second. Then I'll see you at quarter past three—. Phew! Sort of shot, aint I?"

"Sort of—not much," James agreed.

"More'n you know!" Mr. Budlong said with an unexpected, cackling laugh. "Well, I'm going back to the office, and lock my door, and lie down for an hour, old man. Bye!"

Well, at least he had removed his ravings from this particular establishment, poor

devil! Young Mr. Cranning watched him enter the elevator, and then returned to his own private office, head shaking.

Poor old Fred—a nut! Yep, just a plain nut! Or had something entered his life to drive him near to insanity—something in his business, maybe? It seemed unlikely. Even if his business collapsed entirely, much of Mr. Budlong's comfortable fortune, as James chanced to know, had been left as a trust fund by his father.

Then perhaps —well, there wasn't much to be gained by speculating on the underlying causes of Mr. Budlong's trouble. James Cranning had troubles and problems of his own, and of these latter the most formidable was: just how to buy Mr. Budlong another car before night!

Ifs and ands, and buts had been eliminated from the matter now; the thing would have to be done! If only Mr. Budlong's mental kink had entwined itself about his house, or his furniture, or the Sunnyvale railroad station, things would have been simpler. It had not. To the best of James's divining, it was a purely automobile kink, hard fastened to that one car. Why, if he told the man the plain truth in his present state, he might easily wind up in a padded cell! Preposterous, maybe, but these things do happen.

Well, then? How does one materialize a two-thousand-dollar automobile from the thin air in the course of a few hours? Young Mr. Cranning folded his arms, and thought, and thought. On the face of it, one doesn't! One has to have the two thousand dollars first, and—James stared across his office for a moment, almost in terror, and then laughed mirthlessly. Of all the ironical notions so far, this one was—

"Yes? Looking for Mr. Cranning?" that gentleman demanded as he left his chair, and hurried to the outer office. "Why —Irma!"

She was there and gazing directly at him—an Irma lovely as ever, and still wearing a new effect this early afternoon which quite baffled Mr. Cranning. She seemed alert from head to foot; her eyes were warm and glowing, and in them lay the baffling quality of the effect.

They were not particularly angry, these eyes, and they were not sentimental; in them, James sensed, a thousand inquiries were bobbing about on a sea of suppressed excitement. She had preceded him into the private office now, and was looking around quickly.

"I thought you had a stenographer?"

"She's out."

"How long will she be out?"

"Oh, another half hour, I suppose. Why?"

Mrs. Fred Budlong smiled brilliantly at him, and found a chair.

"If she comes in, find an errand for her, and send her out again," she directed. "You and I are overdue for a strictly private chat, Jimmy!"

"Are we?" James muttered, as he returned to his own seat.

Delight, for some reason, did not quite overcome him in this moment. If ever a lady personified the sort of Trouble one spells with a capital T, Irma Budlong did that very thing for James. In the nature of things, about five minutes hence, Dorothy would come walking in, and—

"Don't look bored, Jimmy," Irma said with a brief and flashing smile. "I'm going to rouse your interest!"

"Er—yes?"

"Jimmy," Mrs. Budlong said tensely, "just what's afoot? Do you know?"

"Afoot—how?"

"Well—" said the lady, and considered for a moment. "What do you think is wrong with Fred, for one thing?"

"Well, he's in a bad way, poor old chap!" James said readily. "He was in here a few minutes ago, and he—he was sort of irrational, and—say, Irma, I don't want to scare you, but you'll have to know pretty soon: I think Fred's gone crazy!"

Mrs. Budlong did not throw up her hands and scream at this dreadful news. Far from it, in fact! Mrs. Budlong merely showed her wonderful teeth in a new smile, which seemed to hold something of pity for James!

"He's giving a wonderful imitation of a lunatic, at least," she said.

"Oh, I—I don't think he's faking it!" James protested.

"You don't?"

"No, he seems to have settled on that cursed car I borrowed as his very special monomania, and—"

"You needn't explain it to me, Jimmy," Irma broke in. "I've heard about that car nearly all night, and again this morning. Jimmy, I don't know how you're going to manage it, but you must get the beastly thing back to him to-day!"

"I—ah—mean to," said James.

"Surely?"

"Er—yes!" James said bravely.

Irma laughed again, unpleasantly, and with plain satisfaction.

"Good!" she cried. "Then we'll have that excuse for raving removed! You know that he isn't really raving about his car at all, don't you?"

"I didn't know it," James said faintly. "What is he raving about, then?"

"Well, Fred's a queer proposition in some ways," responded Fred's wife. "There's a good deal of the child about him, and very little self-control. When there's a real disturbance inside Fred, he can no more keep it hidden than the sun can keep from shining through that window on a day like this.

"Well, there's a real disturbance going on inside my Frederick just at present, and it has no connection with his automobile, believe me, Jimmy! When you took that thing out and smashed it, I think you saved his life; you gave him a pretext for cursing and shrieking!"

A perplexed and weary line appeared between James's brows.

"I think you're wrong," he said. "He was fond of the car, and—"

"I'm not wrong!" Irma cried. "He began biting his nails and jumping whenever I dropped a pin, just a week ago last Saturday—just a week before you ever borrowed his car—and he has been miles away from me, and everything connected with me, ever since! Why, Jimmy—just as one example—you know how fussy Fred has always been about my jewels?"

"Yes!"

"He had to be sure they were all accounted for, every night. Well, when I told him the burglar had taken all the five pieces that he himself had given me, Fred just grunted, and went on cursing you for breaking his infernal motor, and—Jimmy!" Irma said, and stopped suddenly and gazed at him. "I came here for a purpose, and I—I'm just beating about the bush to fend off that purpose a little longer. If I keep it up for another five minutes, I'll lose my nerve and never tell you!"

"Eh!"

"Yes, I—I came to tell you just what troubles Fred, and—and I'd about as soon lose an arm, Jimmy, because it's going to hurt you!"

"What is?"

"This—or I think it is, for a little while," Irma smiled remarkably. "Jimmy, we didn't get to bed very early last night, and when we did I didn't go to sleep. But Fred did. And—well, after he'd been twisting, and turning, and groaning for a time, he settled down and began to smile in his sleep, Jim; and suddenly he held out his arms to somebody who wasn't there, of course, and he—he said—"

She stopped again. James frowned wonderingly.

"Well, what did he say, Irma?" he asked. "What's the mystery?"

"There isn't any mystery, Jimmy. I think that's the worst of it! He just beamed as if he were looking through the gates of heaven, and he called: 'Dorothy, dearest! Dorothy, my darling!'"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE TRUTH.

FOR a moment Mrs. Fred Budlong was nice enough not to look at James. It may be assumed that she expected the young man to emit at least two or three groans as the first shock of new agony came upon him, and even to burst into tears. So Mrs. Budlong turned back and said:

"You think he's in love with Dot?"

"I had some such impression."

"Oh, I give it up!" cried young Mr. Cranning. "Irma, I think you're as badly off as Fred. Dog-gone it, I'm beginning to think all the women in the world were born plumb loony! Fact, Irma. They're sex crazy, anyway."

"Then you feel that it's quite all right for my husband to be making love to your wife in his sleep?"

"In his sleep—yes," James laughed. "As a matter of fact—and thank Heaven I'm still sane enough to realize it—that was probably the most natural thing in the world. Not pleasing to you, perhaps, Irma—but natural. You see, they did think they were in love, once upon a time, and these things make a record in the brain that sticks.

"Everything does, for that matter. And according to a lot of the stuff I've been reading lately, when you go to sleep your subconscience sort of upheaves, and shoots out a lot of things the old head awake would never think of thinking, if you get what I mean? That's all there is to this, Irma."

Mrs. Budlong crossed her legs and nodded, smiling strangely.

"Well, I get what you mean, but I'm afraid that that's not all there is to it," she said. "Jimmy, two or three times lately, you've thought me pretty incoherent, haven't you?"

"Um—yes, I guess I have, Irma."

"That was because I was just on the verge of telling you about their romance, and each time I stopped because I wasn't absolutely certain. Now, after watching Fred in his sleep, I am!"

"Why?"

"Because it all jibes, of course."

"Do you think you have more evidence?" James asked, almost contemptuously.

"I'm afraid I do," Irma said pensively. "You see, I've been doing most of the housework lately, Jim. Well, a week ago Friday I was emptying Fred's waste basket into the stove in the kitchen, and several bits of paper fluttered out. I picked them up, and just as I was about to throw them in, I noticed one, which seemed to be the end of a letter. It had on it: 'Your first love, Dot!'"

"What?"

"And she was his first love, so far as I've heard, Jimmy."

"But—that's ridiculous. It may have been some old letter. It may—"

"Only it wasn't, Jimmy. The date line was there, too, and it had been written the day before. And the third piece—there were only three—said: '—it is high time that we—'"

"We what?"

"That was all, Jimmy. Just those three pieces of rather dark blue paper with—"

"Dot uses dark-blue paper!" James cried, and this time there was agony in his voice.

"I know she does," sighed Irma.

"Have you—got them with you?" young Mr. Cranning continued with difficulty.

"No, they're home, though. And that's not all, either. You know how finicky Fred is about carrying much money? Well, he drew out five thousand dollars in cash last Monday!"

"What for?"

"True enough—what for?" Irma echoed. "I'd never have known it if his monthly balance and paid checks hadn't arrived Saturday morning with the envelope unsealed. I took them out to put on his desk, and that five-thousand-dollar one was on top of the pile. Enough for a flying start, if they're really contemplating leaving us, Jimmy?"

"Yes!" agreed James Cranning, and his voice was growing thicker and thicker. "And, Irma!"

"Well?"

"When Fred—when Fred was in here a little while ago, he made some sort of slip. He began to say something about 'Dot and I,' and then he swore he'd said nothing of the kind."

Mrs. Budlong nodded without great interest in this.

"Yes, she seems to be on his mind. Jimmy, you're not stone-blind, are you?"

"I give it up!" muttered James. "Why?"

"Well, has Dorothy been the same these last few days?"

"No, she hasn't!" Mr. Cranning answered. "There's no getting away from that, Irma. Or she hasn't been the same since Saturday night, anyhow. She refused absolutely to let me explain why I got in so late."

"How could she do that?"

"Well, however she did it, she did it," James said grimly. "We're not even on speaking terms now and—oh, I don't see why I shouldn't tell you, Irma. Dot's going to leave me."

"I have an idea that she's been planning it for some time."

"But this is definite. She says she's going Thursday."

"When?" Irma cried very sharply.

"Thursday. Why?"

Mrs. Fred Budlong's beautiful eyes snapped.

"Well, Jimmy, my dear Frederick mentioned Thursday as the day when he might have to go on a little trip!"

"Is that possible?" James gasped.

"And is it possible that those two are going to use you and me, two innocent people, to get their beastly divorces?" Irma demanded, and her eyes now blazed. "Has any one any way of proving that you were in the house—in that closet?"

"Proof? I dunno," James said faintly. "I—I think Rockford may have suspected it."

"So do I! Jimmy, if you could have seen the way he smiled at me when he found the key wouldn't work!" Mrs. Budlong said breathlessly. "And yesterday he called up three times, wanting to talk to Fred, and he called again this morning, and asked him to stop at the office before he took the train."

"What did he want?"

"He wouldn't tell me. But he laughed each time he called up," Irma gasped; and abruptly her head dropped and she covered her face, and her whole body shook with sobs. "Oh, Jimmy—Jimmy! It's too horrible!"

A rather heartbreaking sight as he watched her was young James Cranning, with his gray cheeks and his stricken eyes. So many bright thoughts were hurrying through his brain now! If it was all so—and as yet he seemed unable to believe that any of it could be so—several things explained themselves.

Dorothy's persistent refusal to hear him; Rockford's pleased and genial air—Rockford, apparently, was enjoying both sides of the case in more ways than one; he might well have sold his information to Budlong, and then, being a thrifty soul, have collected a bit from James as well.

And that would account for Budlong's excitement at seeing Rockford here, would it not? James's smile was drawn as he silently patted Irma's shoulder; small use indeed to tell the girl of these things!

She was erect again, the little tempest over.

"Well, Jimmy? We're innocent. What are we going to do about it?"

"Wait, I guess, and see—"

"No!" cried Mrs. Budlong. "We'll have a show-down, without any waiting! You get that car back to him to-night, without fail! Then, if he should happen to calm down at once, we'll know— Oh, what's the use of pretending?" the lady laughed bitterly. "That car has no more to do with his hysterics than the man in the moon! Fred's simply in a turmoil of fear that something will happen before they can get away, and he's not bright enough to be able to conceal it. Dot—well, Dot's a woman, and different.

"Maybe it's just as well that Fred's as simple as he is, Jimmy. If he'd happened to be the self-contained kind, they might just have walked out without a sign of warning."

"Maybe," groaned James. "Maybe."

"You poor kid," sighed Irma Budlong, and laid a hand upon his bowed head. "I think I'm sorrier for you than I am for myself. I'll run along, Jimmy."

"All right," sighed James.

"And you have his car back to-night!" concluded Mrs. Budlong, and her smile was almost evil. "When we've ripped that excuse out from under him I think my Freddy's going to crash."

"I'll have it there," said Mr. Cranning.

Well—he was alone now. A long time James merely sat and stared straight ahead. It couldn't be! That was all—it couldn't be! He knew little Dot far too well not to know that the whole thing was sheer impossibility.

Although, if it was so very impossible, why was Dot writing notes to Fred Budlong, and subscribing herself his first love?

Why was she leaving James? There had always been that inconvenient jealous streak in her, but she had never hinted at anything like this before. And also why—well, all right, then! Perhaps it was so!

And if it was, James Cranning decided, as he stood erect, trembling, he'd kill Fred Budlong! Just one second after he had been convinced that it was all fact, James would take the trail after Mr. Budlong, and he'd never leave it until that large person was stretched before him, dead! Just why? James crumpled into his chair again.

What would he gain by wallowing around in Budlong's gore—what would any of them gain? People quite frequently make mistakes in their matings. Perhaps Budlong and Dorothy had done that—perhaps that ancient and apparently fleeting attachment of theirs had been real love? Perhaps—and here James's throat grew tight and his vision misty—Dorothy really didn't give a hang for her husband. So would it be quite the gentlemanly and considerate thing for him to slaughter one for whom she appeared to give a number of hangs? As had happened so many times before in so many similar cases, James Cranning really did desire Dorothy's happiness above all other things.

Bowed over his desk, James sighed with surpassing grimness. Happiness—well, sometimes one bought happiness. Maybe that had something to do with the disaster, too. Quite deliberately he had steered his dark meditations away from the money angle, but now that phase rose again and loomed mockingly before him.

Up to date, Mr. Cranning had been distinctly the struggling young business man. Not that he and Dorothy had lacked food, or clothes, or a roof to cover them, to be sure; but on the other hand, they certainly maintained no box at the opera, and Dorothy had never been seen driving about the park on sunny afternoons with her footman and chauffeur up ahead.

A little later, he had believed implicitly, he would have passed from the struggling class and into the comfortable class, and considerably later perhaps even into the opulent class. But that wasn't now—and ladies have a great way of giving too much value to the living present.

Fred Budlong—the bulky ass!—had never known the meaning of struggle. Money in moderation had been a matter of course to him all his life; right now he had a substantial patrimony and a prosperous business. So perhaps it was the things that he could buy her, after all, which appealed to Dorothy? Perhaps she was just the same as so many other women, and—no, she wasn't! She was above all that!

Young Mr. Cranning, suddenly whining, suddenly shaking his fists at the unresponsive ceiling, even whimpered aloud that Dorothy was above all that—although, apparently, she wasn't above writing letters to the great clod and calling herself his first love and advising him that it was high time they did—something or other. He didn't know what, and he didn't want to know what. But his Dot wasn't above that!

Another interval, and James Cranning sat up, hard-mouthed and with no mistiness of vision.

At least, he wasn't absolutely certain that the awfulness was real; when that final blow should come was altogether in the hands of Fate. But he was utterly certain of one thing: Fred Budlong would get his damned car to-night!

As to the exact manner in which the car was to be secured— Out in the corridor a porter paused in passing James's door, listened to the great burst of strange laughter, and shook his head in sorrow and amazement. He knew Mr. Cranning's voice and his laugh quite well, but up to this moment he had never suspected that Mr. Cranning was a drinking man.

No more remarkable laugh than this one had ever left the throat of James.

It dwindled presently to a rumble, but still he sat and stared at the safe, and shook with his ghastly merriment. For the means was at hand! To-morrow or next day, since he seemed likely now to have little use for a house and a home, he would go about raising another two thousand dollars on his Sunnyvale property, and so would repair the slight indiscretion he was

about to commit— But Budlong would have his car to-night, all right enough!

Chuckling, cackling savagely, young Mr. Cranning opened his safe and extracted the package which contained Irma's jewelry. A minute or so he squatted and gazed upon it, muttering in his new, stunned way, and rather overcome by the irony of the situation.

Then James ceased his muttering, and found his hat, considered himself in the mirror, and smoothed out certain lines of suffering; and after that, looking very much like the normal James, indeed, departed from his lately happy little office with the packet fast under his arm.

The private entrance of his pawnshop swung open once more at his touch. The same baldheaded man was sitting at the same desk, too. He glanced up at young Mr. Cranning in his bored, professional way, and, recognizing him, grew a shade less bored and a shade more inquiring.

"Oh, how-de-do?" he even muttered to one who seemed to have become a steady customer.

"How are you?" James responded with sufficient heartiness and good cheer. "Back again, you see."

"I see," agreed the baldheaded man as he rose and switched on the lights in a booth.

Quite impassive, he sat and waited patiently while young Mr. Cranning untied his parcel with fingers that were not too steady. He watched the tremor with the faintest visible curiosity.

"Needed a little more cash than I had supposed," James said brightly.

"I see," said the other.

"Got on the wrong side of the market last week, and they're doing their best to squeeze me out."

"I see," said the baldheaded man.

"And so I brought these around," James concluded, and waited an instant; for in his strange state this afternoon he knew that if the being stated just once more that he saw, the package would be shattered over his shining skull, and James Cranning would flee, a shrieking maniac!

This time, however, the man merely nodded, and James went on with his string—and there they were, anyway! He pushed the little kid cases forward and then sat back more or less comfortably. He had felt no real infatuation for this baldheaded individual at their first meeting; now there was something about him which James distinctly did not like—something in the way he glanced at his new customer.

He had screwed the loupe into his eye now, and was running Irma's bracelet back and forth beneath it. Without comment he laid it aside, and passed to Irma's very beautiful lace pin; and for a moment his head was raised and he glanced at James with the loupeless eye, and then went on to the third of the cases.

This evidently was Irma's rope of pearls. The expressionless being examined them one by one, and opened the last case—and young Mr. Cranning started and stared, for he had not even known that Irma owned a diamond necklace, far less that the crown jewels of some monarchy had been looted to secure it for her!

The baldheaded man drew an audible breath, proving at least that he was human, and pursed his lips. Then, slowly, his eyes came up, and he looked directly at James—and looked and looked—and suddenly gazed down on the necklace again, perhaps one second before James would have burst into wild and senseless protest that he hadn't stolen the bauble.

Well, no matter what sort of eye the shiny-pated one might have, he mustn't let that happen again! He braced himself, and this was well, for the bald one was regarding him once more and murmuring:

"Well, Mr. Jordan?"

"Eh?"

"How much do you want on these?"

"I want two thousand dollars."

"Umum?" mused the other, which might have meant anything.

"And not a cent less than that!" James added firmly. "Those things are worth a good many times two thousand."

He was rather well satisfied that he had made this speech convincingly, too. The other nodded.

"I see. These are your property, of course, Mr. Jordan?" he queried pensively.

"No; I don't wear that sort of thing. They're my wife's."

"I see that they are all marked 'I. B.,'" the other submitted, apparently without great interest.

"Er—that's my wife's maiden name, of course—Billings—Ida Billings!" Mr. Cranning said hastily.

"I see," responded the person. "Those other things—the jewelry you brought in here an hour or two ago?"

"What about them?"

"Those were your wife's also?" asked the baldheaded man, and yawned.

What amazing craft had grown up within James Cranning, so lately a simple and honest young man! In no more than the tenth part of one second he recalled that upon every piece of Dorothy's jewelry there was an engraved "D. C." of some visibility.

"They have been my wife's for the last year or so," he explained, and also yawned. "Formerly they belonged to a cousin of my wife's, who died—a Miss Carter, of Baltimore. Why?"

The other merely smiled faintly and considered the gems.

And James relaxed, for this, of course, was the last stage of the dreary game. Now the gentleman was seeking to determine just how much less than two thousand dollars James would accept. And right there he was, as the saying goes, fooling himself, because James Cranning, for the soundest possible reasons, did not intend to accept even one dollar less than the two thousand.

For the matter of that, it was ridiculous to risk all that collection in the hands of a stranger for so trivial a sum. What he should have done, as a matter of principle and of sound business, was to have named four thousand as his lowest figure; the difference would have rested comfortably enough in his bank for the day or two wherein he was finding the wherewithal to redeem the valuable trinkets.

And not only was it the thing he should have done, but very possibly it was the thing he should do now!

James Cranning sat up and cleared his throat.

The other also sat up and smiled faintly.

"No," he said.

"No what?"

"I do not care to make a loan on these."

"You don't—hey? Not—not any loan at all, you mean?" James gasped.

"Not any loan at all," confirmed the baldheaded man, as he closed the last of the cases and pushed them all toward James.

CHAPTER XV.

THE HOME TOWN.

FOR a man who had been on the point of asserting himself so very strongly Mr. Cranning presented rather an odd figure. Quite literally his jaw dropped, leaving his mouth open; he snapped the jaw back into place in a second or so, but most of the shocked expression remained intact.

Because this was—why, this was all nonsense, of course!

James Cranning's immediate future, unsatisfactory as it may have been in certain aspects, had held at least one bright and mildly humorous spot: he had been about to pawn jewels originally bought by Fred Budlong for the purpose of buying Budlong himself a new car! And whatever this apathetic, baldheaded idiot might be trying to put over—

"Why not?" gasped James.

"I don't care to make the loan," said the other rather impatiently.

"But why don't you?"

The man smiled slightly and shrugged.

"Well, if you insist upon knowing, Mr. Jordan, I am not at all satisfied that these things are yours to offer as security."

"D'ye mean to say—" James began violently.

"Let's not get into an argument over this," the other suggested briefly. "There is nothing doing, friend."

Now he was about to rise! And if he did rise, and if James did gather up his loot and depart, he knew, somehow, that he'd enter the next pawnshop in fear and trembling. And in any case, he could not spend

the afternoon trudging from pawnshop to pawnshop; there was a car to be acquired before the agency closed, and the drive out to Sunnyvale is no five-minute run. Abruptly James found that he had gathered all the forces of deception that were within him.

"Listen!" he cried tragically.

"Eh?"

James Cranning leaned across the table. Obviously, he was in a high state of excitement.

"Mister," he said swiftly, "I got into the market on the wrong side because I thought I could beat it—and I still think I can beat it if you give me an even break here! I've got seventy-one thousand dollars sunk in margins at this minute, and I'm just the breadth of one hair from being wiped out!

"I've mortgaged my home to the limit, and I've raised money on my cars; I've dropped what little money my wife had into this, and I've even borrowed five thousand dollars from her mother—a lady nearly eighty years old, and it was the last cent she had in the world!

"I've got it straight that things will turn to-morrow morning when the exchange opens; but it's half-past two now, and if I haven't put down nineteen hundred dollars inside the next twenty minutes, I'm wiped out clean, absolutely and completely!

"I won't have ten cents I can call my own—and as a matter of fact, if that happens," James concluded huskily, "I'm going to put a bullet through this dome of mine so that it can't do any more damage!"

He paused, panting, nor was this panting quite all sham. The bald-headed man, as well he might, looked astonished.

"So I'm a damned fool, mister, and I admit it!" James's hoarse croak advised the other. "But don't crucify me on that account! How do you want me to satisfy you that this stuff belongs to—to Ida?"

The bald-headed man wore a pencil behind his ear. He now removed this pencil, and scratched the lobe of his ear with the lead point—not, of course, just the tidiest trick. Also, he looked straight and fixedly at James Cranning.

And this was no ordinary stare; this, James sensed, was something very special, for unusual occasions like the present. The man's eye was not hard and not rough; it was more like a surgeon's tool, which laid open one section of the victim's innermost brain, and probed about—laid open another section, and probed further.

James smiled wearily, resignedly. He would have smiled with much greater assurance had he understood, as did the gentleman with the scapel eye, that no intelligent person ever could have mistaken James Cranning for a criminal.

"All right," the bald-headed man said suddenly.

"You'll—let me have the two thousand?"

"Yes," said the other, and reached for Irma's possessions.

Well, he was going! Whew! He was out of sight now, James discovered with the corner of one eye. Shaking, he slumped down further in his chair. The cold-eyed devil had suspected that something was all wrong—as indeed it was. But James had fooled him, by however narrow a margin; ten seconds more of that stare and, ridiculous or not, James suspected that he would have thrown himself upon his knees, and begged for mercy.

Minutes, and he was still weak, but he had taken to glancing around expectantly. Here he came, just as he had returned before, with a sheaf of little tickets in one hand, and a sheaf of yellow bills in the other. He was even smiling almost like a human!

"Well, here you are, Mr. Jordan," he said. "Count it, please."

James counted it, calmly as might be.

"That's all right, thanks," he said. "I'll have to rush now."

"Don't you want to call your brokers on our 'phone here?"

"No, I'll have to cart this down myself," James grinned fleetingly. "Good-by."

"Good-by, Mr. Jordan—and good luck!" the bald-headed man said quite heartily.

It was over! Out in the open, young Mr. Cranning breathed deeply, and looked about him— Ah! Another poor wretch coming in here for salvation, eh? James smiled faintly and grimly at him—at a big, powerful person with a sour face, and a gener-

ally disgusted mien, who glared back at James and passed on inward. James grunted. Doubtless, the man thought himself in trouble.

Well, as compared with the knowledge of such things acquired by James himself since last Saturday afternoon, he simply didn't know what trouble was. Head down, shoulders hunched, James strode to the corner, and turned downtown toward his motor agency.

The young man with the shiny hair was unaffectedly pleased to see him. Blandly, he indicated the gray car, which stood now just inside the large door, and all ready to roll out.

He glanced rather dubiously at the clock, and prepared a diplomatic word or two regarding the advisability of certified checks when one appeared under these circumstances so near to closing of banking hours —and there was something rapturous in his sigh as he observed the tight-lipped, inexplicably grim young customer in the act of counting out real one-hundred-dollar bills; for here indeed was the perfect sale.

And the perfect car, too, James reflected morosely as he drove out. Lord! This engine was just as sweet as the one he had wrecked—and he had perjured himself and purloined the jewels of a lady who was not his wife, to buy it for somebody else!

He wormed his way eventually out of the city traffic, and put on a little speed, and then, when suburb after suburb lay behind, and Sunnyvale was coming ever closer, put on not so much speed. Inside, he was turning chilly and sickish again.

He meant to pause at his home, and convince Dorothy that he had at least replaced the car; but terror surged through him at the thought of facing her to whom, so very recently, he had raced home every night with boyish haste. He'd burst into tears, or into denunciations—just which he had now no idea.

A mile or two, he considered the alternative of driving straight to Fred Budlong's, delivering the four-wheeled disaster, and walking home. Another mile, and he abandoned the idea. Without a second's unnecessary delay he had to see Dorothy! He had to look at her, into her. and learn for himself that Irma was either a liar or a fool! He had to face Dorothy, and know—and something, with whatever accuracy, advised James that he would know!

Thus he drew up before his home.

He waited an instant at the street end of the short path. He seemed to know that the door would open, and that Dorothy would be standing there, shamefaced and repentant and, which was much more important, herself!

He seemed to know—well, he didn't seem to know anything, did he? He had been standing here so long that old Mr. Botts, one door to the north, was adjusting his glasses and squinting at James. Young Mr. Cranning strode into his home, and looked about.

She was sitting there, in the very chair where she had been seated at another of his unfortunate entrances, when she had switched on the lights! Now she glanced up frigidly, and James's poor heart stopped. It was fact! She hated him! No woman ever could look at a man like that unless she hated him.

"Good evening!" James said shortly.

Mrs. Cranning merely nodded.

"There's the car for Fred Budlong, out at the curb."

"I saw it. Why did you bring it here?"

"Simply to show you that the bone-headed lob was getting all that's coming to him!" young Mr. Cranning sputtered. "You were worried about it."

Dorothy's smile grew even more wintry.

"How you hate poor Fred because you ruined his car, don't you?"

"Say! That's not the only reason I hate that addle-pated, lumbering lout, and damn well you—" James shouted suddenly.

"Jim!" cried his wife.

James Cranning mastered himself. Little bulges stood out near his jaw-hinges, and his fists were tight and he trembled, but he mastered himself.

"I'll get out of here before—before I say something!" he muttered thickly.

"It might be well," his wife sneered most unpleasantly; and then, since he was plainly about to leave, she added: "Jim—just a moment."

"What?" croaked James.

Dorothy Cranning leaned back, and sighed quite languidly, and laid aside her magazine.

"Jim, I've been thinking it over, and I can see now that in some ways I have been foolish," she said slowly. "Or perhaps more unjust than foolish. And I wish at least to be just."

"What does it mean?" James asked bluntly.

"Why, mainly, I suppose, that I have been wrong in refusing to hear whatever it is that you wish to tell me," said pretty Mrs. Cranning, and her smile was more than merely supercilious; it held indeed a quality which started every hair on James Cranning to bristling with blind fury. "So you may tell me now, I think," said Dorothy. "I will listen."

Again—at least to some extent—James had mastered himself. A few seconds, he panted; a few more he devoted to a quite emotional gritting of his teeth. Then, his fists upon his hips, young Mr. Cranning permitted his own eyes to do some really remarkable blazing at Dorothy!

"Well, is—that—so?" he roared.

"Oh, don't! Pray, don't shout like that!" Mrs. Cranning implored, and delicately raised her pretty hands to her ears. "Really, Jim, if you can't use an ordinary tone—"

"Say! Cut that stuff out, woman, and listen to me!" James Cranning cried ferociously, and very noisily. "If you're going to wait for me to tell you anything now, you'll be sitting right there in that same chair seventy million years after hell freezes over! And I won't begin talking till a couple of centuries after that; and when I do, young lady, I'll let you tell me a few things first! Do you get that?"

White, utterly dumfounded, Mrs. Cranning had risen.

"Why, how—how dare you use that tone to me?" she gasped.

"Tone! Hah! Dorothy, when I really get to going, you'll think that tone was just the chirping of a little bit of a baby canary bird! Because—"

"Stop! Do you hear? Stop!" Dorothy cried regally. "I shall scream for help if you don't stop this instant! And what is more, now I refuse absolutely to hear you. Just in that one minute, you have proved the whole case against yourself! No innocent man in this world ever could—"

"Innocent man be—" James began in a tactful shout.

"Jim Cranning, just one more of your filthy curses—" Dorothy said, and then she turned her back upon him, obviously overwhelmed with disgust. "Oh, go—go," she cried. "Go to your woman!"

"Yes, and that's exactly where I'm going!" was the happy truth that James yelled at his wife, and he turned about with a violent jerk, and so pounded once more from his home!

Choking audibly, mumbling and muttering in the most absurd way, he banged down behind the wheel of the new car, and sent the vehicle whizzing up the square. Well—things were settled! It had been a very brief, very unlovely sort of interview, but at least, things were settled now, and all hands knew just where they stood.

Dorothy Cranning was entirely through with her present husband. That had been in her eyes, and on her lips, and everywhere about her. In cold fact, Irma Budlong had no more to do with the matter than had tne Sunnyvale stationmaster; she was merely the excuse for that pose which Dorothy had adopted to veil her own complete change. Actually—it occurred rather bewilderingly to James—the girl did not now care enough about her husband to loathe him honestly!

As to whether James himself was completely heartbroken or completely consumed with rage, he could not have told. It was even possible that he himself hated little Dot! Assuredly at this moment mighty few of the old warm sentiments toward that young woman were making themselves felt within him. So maybe, incredible as it would have seemed a week ago, they had made a serious mistake in ever marrying. All the evidence seemed to point in that direction, this very early evening!

Maybe she'd be happier with Fred Budlong and —no, no! Young Mr. Cranning, having missed a parked car by about one centimeter, slowed down, and looked about him, wild-eyed and breathing heavily. The

whole world might have gone crazy and he himself might be a hopeless egoist, but he couldn't conceive Dot as Mrs. Frederick Budlong.

Presently a mumbled laugh rattled morosely, deep down in James's throat. A vast difference that made, whether he could conceive the horror or not! The fickle pair themselves were only too apparently satisfied, and he—well, he counted for just about as much as Irma, the other undesired one, counted. The hands had been dealt and examined, and James and Irma were merely among the discarded cards!

So there may have been something new, something softer than usual, in the smile with which James Cranning greeted Mrs. Fred Budlong, perhaps two minutes later, as she answered his ring.

"Jimmy!" she cried. "Come in!"

"Isn't that Mrs. Harkness on that porch over there?"

"Watching? Of course it is. Let her go hang, Jimmy! Perhaps we'll give her something to watch and talk about, later on," Irma laughed rather remarkably. "Come in, Jimmy."

"Fred's home?" Mr. Cranning inquired, as he closed the door after him.

"Fred is not. And I take it that your dear wife isn't, either?"

"She was a minute ago."

"Then she'd just come home?"

"No, I think she's been there all day. I didn't ask," James sighed.

Mrs. Fred Budlong's eyes opened.

"That's funny! I supposed that my husband was waiting for her in the city. I saw him biting his nails in the Grand Central, although he didn't see me. He was standing by the information desk, peering at the door and all alert. I thought of course—"

"He was waiting for me," James supplied drearily. "He wanted to go out with me while I got the car, and—oh, I wanted to go alone."

"Because you might have yielded to temptation, and blown his head off in a lonely spot—yes," Irma said cheerily, as she settled at Mr. Cranning's side and patted his hand meditatively. "I'm glad you didn't, Jimmy. Paying for that wouldn't have been quite worth while. Had they finished repairing the thing?"

"I just backed it into your garage."

"You did? Is it all right?"

"It's in perfect shape," James sighed.

Mrs. Budlong's magnificent eyes snapped.

"We're going to learn a lot when he sees that car, Jimmy!"

"Eh?"

"I can't help trying to think even now that maybe things aren't as they seem, you see," the girl laughed drearily. "I've grown so used to Fred as he was before this, and I was so sure that he was the one dependable man, Jimmy.

"If he should calm down as soon as he finds the thing back, if he makes a lot of fuss over it, and all that—why, maybe there is something wrong with him. Maybe he has some nervous disease or—something, or—oh, what's the use?"

"There isn't any use," James said grimly. "I've just been looking at Dot for five minutes, Irma. She's different—entirely different. She glares at me as if she hated me, and when she said something about Fred—why, her whole face seemed to light up!" James cried savagely.

"S-ssh, boy!" Mrs. Budlong said soothingly, and caught his hand. "Getting excited over it isn't worth while, either. I've settled that much to my own satisfaction. We'll wait and see how he takes the car, if he happens to come home."

James did not cast aside the hand this time, even if it was the hand of another man's wife. Nay, James gripped it hard, for at least it was a friendly hand; and his stricken eyes fastened upon Irma, and Irma smiled softly, and—well, by golly, she was a darned fine, sane, handsome girl, and a friend!

James choked. And it seemed to him, as he gulped at this latest unpleasant sensation, that he had been doing nothing but choke for days and days.

Outdoors thick gray clouds were hastening the dusk as they waited, speaking now only infrequently. Minutes dragged along to a quarter hour—to a half hour—and still dragged along. Irma sighed repeatedly, for she, too, was weary, and James sighed sympathetically, for he understood this weari-

ness. There was something shivery and oppressive about the stillness of the house.

No mighty tramping of Frederick Budlong was there—for he had ceased to care about his home. No telephone tinkled, that Dorothy might learn the cause of her husband's delay—for Dorothy had ceased to care about her husband. Irma crossed the room, and switched on one of her heavily shaded lamps. She actually hurried back to James Cranning, and sat very close to him.

"Jimmy, whoever could have thought—" she began, and she could go no further just then. Trembling, she hid her face on James's shoulder!

"There, there, there!" James said soothingly and grimly. "You mustn't be silly, Irma."

His arm went about her protectingly; the girl snuggled a little closer, and looked up at him.

"Jimmy, I've been an awful fool in so many little ways. I've had to roll my eyes at you, and—and at lots of fellows, I suppose. It never meant a thing, of course, but—Jimmy, do you suppose that had anything to do with it? Her being able to take him away from me, I mean?"

"No," the kindly James said firmly enough, although he did not face her. "I guess they were in love in the first place, after all, and so—"

"Well, what the hell," inquired Mr. Fred Budlong himself from the open window which gave upon the small veranda, "are you doing in there with your arms around my wife?"

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

HAIL TO WINTER

COLD winds sweep down from the mountains,
Chill mists creep up from the sea,
The leaves flutter down, red, golden, and brown,
From the boughs of each frost-tinted tree;
The hum of the insects is silenced,
The song-birds have taken their flight,
And the cloud's leaden hue hides the sun from our view,
As we launch on our winter of night.

Adieu to the beautiful flowers
That blossomed to brighten our way;
And softly we sigh an unwilling good-by
To our short, sweet summer of day.
Yet, hail to the wonders of winter,
To the beautiful, snow-covered night,
With the silvery gleams of the frosty moonbeams
On its broad, trackless reaches of white.

To the shimmering flames of Aurora
That whisper and tremble on high;
To the star-studded field of the night's sable shield,
Or the cloud-hidden, storm-ridden sky.
Cold winds sweep down from the mountains,
And winter drops down like a veil,
But with true northern grit we are welcoming it,
And we say to the winter, all hail!

Vella Truitt.

The Gray Shadow

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

WHEN Marie Marlowe came down from Nome to marry Brick Stewart, who owned a herd of cattle and two flocks of sheep in Central Oregon, she brought along the two things she prized most highly. The first was a Malemute dog she called Sandy, and the other was a full-length coat of Russian sable.

The skins had been given her by a trader because she spent a winter in the ice teaching his children to read and write. The coat was worth a small fortune, and many a woman saw it and almost passed out.

Brick met her at the dock in Seattle, and after he had kissed her four times he exclaimed:

"What's that the steward is bringing off?"

"That's Sandy, my Malemute lead dog. You are going to like him, and he's going to like you. I simply couldn't live without him. You are not angry, are you?"

Of course Brick was not angry. In his present state of mind Marie could have used him as a doormat, and he would have enjoyed the position. They had met at the University of Washington two years before, and the romance had started.

They were married at his father's home up on Queen Anne Hill, and then stepped into Brick's car for the long drive to the ranch, two hundred miles to Portland from Seattle, then out the Columbia River Highway to The Dalles, and after that straight for the heart of Eastern Oregon.

Slow moving, contented flocks of sheep dotted the hills; there were herds of cattle, and once he pointed out a band of wild horses led by a black stallion. And all the while Sandy panted in the back seat along with the baggage.

Early one afternoon they arrived at the ranch, and Sandy sniffed about, discovered the scent of two sheep dogs, Joe and Pete, then crawled into a creek to cool off. He was a cold-country dog, and this country was warm.

By this time he had decided Brick was a good scout. Sandy would have preferred him at the gee-pole of a sled to sitting astride a horse. And the worst of it was, Marie, his beloved mistress, was also riding.

For a month he endured idleness because it was too hot to work, and, being a Malemute, he was bred for heavy work, and leisure soon got on his nerves. But there was no snow to drag a sled over,

nor could he find a man among the cowhands who looked as if he might prospect at times.

They talked in a strange language, and spoke of drifting, the saddle string, and buckaroos, instead of mushing, dog teams, and dog mushers.

Sandy had been given to understand Pete and Joe were potential friends, not enemies; so aside from a certain dignity when he first met the sheep dogs nothing happened. As for Pete and Joe, they took one look at Sandy and decided he was a dog worth letting alone.

It grew cooler the second month, and, besides that, Sandy was becoming accustomed to the climate. Early one morning he followed the sheep dogs to their charges.

Two weeks later Brick called Marie. "Come here quick. I want to show you something; bring the binoculars."

Brick was pointing to the band, streaming over a ridge like a gray flood. Pete and Joe were having their paws full, figuratively speaking, and Sandy was lending them a paw on his own account.

A cry of delight came from Marie's lips as she lowered the glasses.

"The old dear has found his place," she exclaimed. "Isn't he wonderful? And he's tireless."

"Some of the men warned me to keep the Malemute away from the sheep; claimed there was so much wolf in him he would turn killer, but—I don't know!"

"Oh, Sandy understands, I am sure of it. See how well he works." She extended the glasses to Brick.

"I've watched him for a couple of days. I'm satisfied."

II.

With the coming of fall and cooler weather snow appeared on the mountain peaks and began working its way down to the timber line. Then one afternoon a snowstorm struck. And that night Sandy went mad with joy.

He tore around and around the house and barns, thrust his nose into the only drift he could find, then rolled in it. If some one only would hook him up to a sled and yell "Mush!" he would be happy.

Then the storm cleared away, a crust formed, and a cold moon rose over colder peaks. Something that night aroused Brick Stewart from a sound sleep.

"Great guns, Marie, what's that?"

"What's what?" She had heard nothing and, awakened so abruptly, she was half frightened. "What?"

"Listen!"

Then it came again, a mournful wail, softened by distance. The girl smiled in the half darkness.

"It makes me homesick; it's the howl of the Malemute. Poor old Sandy hears the call of the North, I guess. Haven't I heard it many a moonlit night. Listen—isn't it thrilling?"

"Huh! Sounds like the call of the wild or something."

Brick grunted and rolled over. Presently he slept, but his wife continued awake, gripped by the spell of the night and the memories that howling stirred. It grew fainter and fainter and finally died away.

Morning brought a grim-faced man who owned a ranch five miles distant. He drove over in a light truck used for hauling stuff about his ranch. In the rear was the carcass of a sheep.

"Take a look at this, Brick," he said, with a note of challenge in his voice. "Your dog ran wild last night. One of my men heard him howling like a wolf, and this morning one of my sheep dogs came in chawed up. I found this dead sheep!"

Brick Stewart experienced a strange sensation. The wild howling lingered in his memory.

He looked at Sandy, sleeping now, perhaps well fed from his night's raiding. He rather liked Sandy, and Marie loved him. Still, if he was a killer—

"Are you sure Sandy turned the trick? How about a timber wolf?"

"Ain't been a timber wolf in these parts for twenty years." The other's lips set firmly. "A man hates to kill his own dog, Brick, so I'll do it for you!"

"Got to have stronger evidence than that. A coyote might—"

"No chance, Brick. The tracks were

in the snow this morning. They were too big for a coyote. They were about the size of that Malemute's tracks, same shape. Different than a sheep dog's, too. See where Pete and Joe have walked, then look where the Malemute stepped, and you can see the difference!"

"I'll look into it, Nelson."

"You'll do more than that, Brick. I don't aim to pick no fuss, but I warned you he'd turn wild. He did. If it 'd been your sheep he killed, it would have been none of my business, but he killed my sheep, and that makes it my business."

"If he killed your sheep, I'll pay for it, but I'm not sure he did!" Brick found himself defending Sandy, though secretly believing him guilty.

The door opened, and Marie appeared. "What is the trouble?"

"Your dog killed a sheep of mine last night," Nelson said quickly, "and you know the penalty for horse thieves and dogs that kill sheep—death!"

"Yes, I know, but Sandy never killed that sheep. Why, in the North he was around reindeer, the wolf's natural prey, and he never bothered them. I know Sandy!"

"And I know my sheep is dead!"

"We'll investigate this, Nelson. If Sandy killed your sheep, we'll dispose of him and pay you for your loss."

"And if he kills another while you are investigating—"

"You'll be settled with in full."

"If you don't do something, I'll settle him in full. Lock him up to-night, and see what happens. There'll be no killing!" Nelson started his motor and rumbled away. He was thoroughly angry.

That night Brick locked Sandy up in a shed, and the last thing he remembered was Sandy peering at him from the wooden bars as if conscious of mistrust on the man's part.

"It's the only way, old fellow!" Brick walked back to the house in a thoughtful mood.

This killing of Sandy was going to be tough on Marie. She had given up a lot to come down here and marry him. She was of the North and he had uprooted her, so to speak. Sandy was the connecting link between her girlhood and her womanhood.

The next morning Sandy was waiting on the back steps. Marie could have told Brick that a Malemute quickly gnaws through wooden bars.

He got the dog out of sight and waited, watching the road Nelson would certainly take if there had been another killing.

"If Nelson comes, Marie, I'll have to dispose of him. You understand, don't you, dear?"

"Yes, I understand, but—oh, Nelson is coming!"

Nelson's rage was a bit cold this morning. He wore an I-told-you-so expression. "Well, he raided the flock last night, Brick. Did you tie him up?"

"No, I locked him up, Nelson!"

Nelson looked puzzled. "And did he get away, Brick?"

"Yes, Nelson, he got away!"

Nelson's laugh, brief, unpleasant, devoid of humor, broke the silence that followed Brick's admission.

"All right, Brick, I'll be on my way. This must be settled in full. I'll send you a bill for the sheep, market price! And to-night I'll be hidden in my flock with a thirty-thirty rifle!"

Brick nodded. "You've a right to protect your sheep, Nelson. But I can't believe the dog's guilty."

"That's because it's your dog, Brick. I'll be going along. We've both got violent tempers, and more than one worthless dog has led to the killing of good men."

Brick had to thank Nelson for that. He could not blame Nelson, either.

He noticed that Sandy slept throughout the day as if he had ranged far the previous night. Brick searched in the ranch storeroom and found a section of chain. As the chain rattled Sandy lifted his head, then like a flash he sensed restraint and vanished.

Brick saw him bounding for a clump of brush bordering the creek. He looked back apprehensively and was gone.

"It beats the deuce how much dogs know," Brick growled.

He found his hand on the butt of his gun.

"No, a pistol won't do; I'll need a rifle. I'd better do the job myself and make sure of it—don't want the poor cuss dragging himself about wounded."

They did not see Sandy that day, but that evening Marie was very quiet and twice she cried, but she did not attempt to stop Brick when he cleaned and loaded the thirty-thirty.

"I won't shoot unless he's caught in the act, Marie; I promise you that. If we can get hold of him I'll ship him back to Nome; I'll agree to that, too."

Then he donned his mackinaw and mitts and stepped into the night. It was bright moonlight, the air was crisp, there was a thin crust on the snow.

Brick worked over toward Nelson's sheep. Here in a draw it was sheltered from the cold wind, and there was feed above, where the wind had blown the snow off.

He was still a quarter of a mile away when from the center of the band flame leaped three times in quick succession. The crack of a thirty-thirty broke the night silence, and the echo was hurled sharply back from the neighboring peaks, until the whole district seemed filled with shooting.

A gray object, almost a shadow, swept from the edge of the flock to the timber and merged with darker shadows. Nelson had missed his chance. It was difficult to shoot after dark, particularly when a man is moved by rage.

Brick Stewart retraced his steps, his mind a curious mixture of elation and disappointment. Nelson had missed, but Brick had seen the gray object with his own eyes.

For nearly an hour Brick worked his way along the edge of the timber, and though he frequently sighed, nevertheless his mind was made up. He was never a man to dodge the issue, regardless of cost.

As he neared his own sheep there was an unexpected movement in the brush, and Sandy emerged. For several seconds he stood in the moonlight, sharply outlined against a snowbank.

Brick raised the rifle, and Sandy's big, fine head came within range of the sights; Brick's finger hesitated, and the next instant Sandy had scented the man and was trotting toward him. Brick swore.

"Why didn't he turn, or snarl, or something. I can't shoot the old boy when he's coming toward me with so much affection in his attitude." He swore mildly again and waited.

A cold breeze came through the timber, stirring the leaves, drifting on to the valley below. The dog grew rigid, then with a bound vanished.

"Got suspicious the last minute," Brick muttered, "and he moved too quick for me to shoot. That settled that. He knows how we stand, and it'll make it easier for me."

The man took up the trail—the big, wolfish footprints in the snow. From the impression it was clear the dog was bounding away with all his speed and strength.

Brick returned to the open to head him off. A moment later the silence of the night was broken by the striking of many hoofs against frozen ground. It reminded Brick of an abrupt hail storm.

The flock of sheep was suddenly moving, and in the moonlight he saw them stream from the draw while Pete and Joe bounded to keep the flock together. Then from the timber sprang a gray shadow straight for the nearest sheep. Pete turned and met the other with a snarl, and the click of the wolf fangs came distinctly through the night. Pete cried out sharply and fled, no match for his enemy, but wounded as he was, the sheep dog made another stand with his back to the flock.

Brick Stewart lifted his rifle and emptied it at the killer, and stopped him within twenty feet of the trembling Pete. The gray shadow slid on his hind legs in an effort to stop, then turned and raced for the woods.

And at that moment Brick grew cold all over, and something primitive deep within was stirred violently. A second gray shadow had leaped from the darkness and cut off the killer's retreat.

"Sandy!" the man cried. "At him, Sandy!"

And then they came together, fang met fang, body met body, for this was to be a fight to the death. And as he watched Brick understood why Sandy had howled on that moonlight night.

From distant ranges a timber wolf had appeared in his quest for food, and Sandy had experienced a sudden feeling of kinship, or was it resentment?

Night after night he had sought the wolf without result, but whether his quest was friendly or not, all this changed when the wolf attacked the flock Sandy had come to regard as his particular charge.

With rifle ready as a club Brick approached the struggling animals, but so swift were their movements, so darting attack and retreat, it was impossible to distinguish between friend and foe. He might strike at the wolf, and the crushing blow fall on Sandy.

There were bloodstains in the snow, and a great stretch was broken and disturbed by their stumbling bodies, and through it all the man watched and waited. This was a battle worth waiting a lifetime to see.

It was primitive, as old as the mountains about the casual arena. And then it ended with an abruptness that left the man stunned.

Fangs gleamed briefly and disappeared into the fur about the other's throat. One creature darted away, the other lay trembling on the snow, and when life had left and the limbs stiffened Brick picked up the remains and carried them toward the house down in the valley.

He noticed a light burning in their bedroom, and then he saw Marie framed in the window for a moment. The light disappeared, but a second appeared on the lower floor. And when he was crossing the east pasture he saw her come through the gate and run toward him.

"Oh," she cried, "it took so many shots. I heard them, counted them, and—why did you bring him back?"

Brick smiled. "There! There! This is not Sandy, but a gray shadow that looks like him. This devil has been shot at before; he leaped when the gun flashed and I missed every shot, but Sandy had something that was surer than bullets—his fangs.

"I tried to get him to come, but he would not leave the flock. This wolf skin is prime, and it'll make a great rug for Sandy to sleep on when he stretches out before the log fire we build winter evenings. Get my hunting knife, Marie; I want to finish this skinning job right now. Say, call up Nelson and tell him he owes Sandy an apology, and it had better take the form of a dog collar properly inscribed. Nelson isn't a bad sort; he'll come through."

"What? Call him this time of night?"

"Sure. He may be in bed, but he's not asleep. You see, Nelson is quite a shot; he took three cracks at this wolf and missed. He's so mad about now sleep is impossible."

Then Brick and Marie looked across the moonlit fields to the splash on the hill where the now quiet flock rested. A gray shadow emerged and looked about. It was Sandy. Sometimes he licked his wounds, but mostly he stood guard.

THE END

THE HOUSE OF JOY

SOME one's knockin' at the door,
But he won't get in!
I know who the "divil" is,
Just as sure as sin.
His name is Gloom; the fiendish cuss
Has chased me since a boy,
But let him knock; 'twill be in vain—
This house belongs to joy!

H. R. Bangs.

The Devil's Saddle

By KENNETH PERKINS

Author of "Horsemen Against the Moon," "The Starlit Trail," etc.

CHAPTER XXIV (*Continued*).

A ROPE FOR A COLLAR.

BIG LARABEE, speechless at first, looked at the gaunt imperious figure. Neither he, nor any one else staring at the old man, could make out what had come over him. His face was at once haggard and flushed; stern, and triumphant.

As he walked, he limped, for his ride had been a hard one; he had cared nothing for mesquite thorn or cactus. His clothes were torn, his skin bleeding, and although he limped he seemed to walk with the air of a conqueror. A victorious soul was in possession of a broken body.

"What-all's happened, Chief?" Larabee managed to stammer. "Why did you come back; you kin see we ain't through with this job yet—the job you wanted us to perform?"

"Praise God you didn't blunder through it too soon!" the Chief said. "These breeds kin be satisfied, and have blood for blood. But Harry ain't goin' to hang. He goes free."

He concluded in a quiet tone—the finality of which no man could have doubted. "If you-all are sot on a lynchin' you kin have same. I'm offerin' up myself to you in his place. I'm offerin' myself to you, Larabee, who's now the sheriff. Put the rope around my neck—and leave my son go."

CHAPTER XXV.

BAFFLED LYNCHERS.

THE little lynch gang stood there in the early dawn of the gulch as silent and immovable as the gray shadows of cactus and tree stumps about them. A word from their real Chief, the voice in

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for October 30.

which that simple sentence was uttered, had cast a spell over them. No man dared contradict him, no man dared disobey a command from him; and yet, for that matter, no man believed he knew what he was saying.

Little Swig Moran made the first move, which was to pull nervously at his mustache. This gesture always seemed to precede either an act, or the process of thinking. It brought forth now the simple gesture of taking the noose from Harry's neck.

Harry Morrel stood free, his piercing eyes staring at his father from under lowered brows. It was to Harry that the light came first. He knew in a flash what had happened. His father had found out about that damnable calico—and the brand!

"You've played your part in this business, Chief," he said with a defiant tone of finality. "Stay out of it. And keep your mouth shut."

"I reckon you think you'll decide the outcome yourself!" the Chief said not without a savage threat in his voice. "Well, by the Eternal you won't. It's been decided for you.

"Maybe you think a prisoner has the right to refuse liberty. Maybe so sometime. But not this time.

"You've got another job on your hands, besides swingin' peacefully up thar in the wind. You've got a fight on. You started out from Neutral Saddle for to get Ladley. I balled up your game. I and my posse have failed—due to my blunderin'. Ladley was up there in the Horse Doctor's Ranch in the Big Mesas.

"The posse would of corraled him there, except that I sent 'em on the wrong trail. It's the first time I ever let a gunman git away; and if you have any honor for the father that begat you it's up to you to square that thar mistake of mine.

"Go get him, son. That's the last request I'll ever make of you: Go get Ladley, and keep the Morrel name an honorable name."

"You mean he went back to Concha's ranch!" Harry exclaimed in a queer voice.

"He went back—I reckon to get her. She's his woman; she rode off to Mexico with him."

Harry's face turned white. "To Mexico!" he cried voicelessly. "Concha—with that killer!"

The father was surprised at the effect this announcement had on his son. He had no idea that the mention of Concha's name would mean anything to him; instead Harry looked as if he had been struck a body blow.

"Go up to the ranch; get their trail," the father said hurriedly. "You don't need no posse. You kin do it alone. Take my horse—it's the fastest for desert ridin', the fastest in the country. Git the trail, and ride through till you kill the bloodthirsty coyote."

"Where's my six-gun?" Harry cried in a pale fury. "And my rifle?"

"Here they are," Grannas said.

When the Papago shaman and the giant squaw saw the prisoner being armed, they set up a scream. But no one paid any attention to them. Harry took his six-gun, stuck it into his holster, and carrying his rifle under his elbow mounted the Chief's horse.

Larabee, the Simpsons, Grannas, and Swig stared open-mouthed at the whole high-handed proceeding.

The Chief had come and, without a word of explanation, had freed and armed their prisoner. But even Larabee was unable to utter a single gasp of an objection.

They all stood there helpless and dumfounded as Harry wheeled the Chief's bronc and disappeared up the canyon in a cloud of dust.

When Harry was gone from the scene they became aware of the frightful din in their ears, which was caused by the two Papagoes. The old man was uttering blasphemous threats—part in broken English, part in Papago. The squaw stood with huge hams of arms uplifted, her body convulsed with her shouts, like a volcano bellowing fire.

"Pale-face Chief gyp us!" the old Shaman was screaming. "Poor Papago is tricked from his revenge. Lies, tricks, palavers—good! Bye'm by tell 'im tribe. Kill all white prospectors."

"Now wait a minute, you shriekin' id-

jits!" the Chief commanded. "No use gettin' to your hoss. No use trailin' him. You can't catch that boy now. Just wait."

He went to the doddering, choking old man, as the latter was climbing to his cayuse. "I ain't finished with you two yet. The boy's innocent. You git that? I am guilty. You breeds want to see a hangin'—all right you'll see one. I'm goin' to pay for the death of your thievin' hoss-rustler kinsman. You savvy that?"

But the old shaman did not savvy. He did not want to savvy. All he wanted was the blood of Harry Morrel. "Your son kill my kinsman! Old Papago want revenge! Nothing more! If not—" The aged savage glared at the Chief out of bleary but venomous eyes. His flat chest heaved, his puckered, mottled lips bared the broken teeth. "Papagoes go on war-path. I make promise!"

The Chief shouted something back. What he said was not heard. The squaw providentially drowned his outburst of scathing oaths.

"Tell that old volcano to shut up!" Swig cried irascibly.

"Tell her what's happened," the Chief shouted at the top of his lungs. "Tell her her brother was a hoss-thief, and if she don't act lady-like we'll arrest her as a accomplice after the fack!"

"Hoss-thief!" they all repeated.

This seemed to impress the palsied old shaman. He went to the hysterical squaw, and put a shaking hand up before her. He yelled at her while she was still screaming and stamping her moccasined feet, and pointing at the escaping rider. Then suddenly her outburst subsided. It subsided into a series of sniffs.

She looked back at the group of men in whom she had put her trust for so long—the group that had at last "come Injun" on her, which was what she should have suspected. Then as a conclusion to her catastrophic eruption, she let out one of her eloquent grunts.

Her other grunts, uttered at climactic points in the palaver, had been more significant that a whole vocabulary of murderous threats and curses. But this one was different. It seemed to say, simply enough, "My brother a horse-thief? Humph! I thought so!"

Then the mountain of trembling flesh subsided—as if settling after the throes of an earthquake.

By this time Larabee, who had stood helpless and baffled while his authority had been so ruthlessly over-ridden, found his tongue.

"Just what do you mean, Chief?" he asked. "I can't quite believe my ears. Did your boy kill a Injun who was a hoss-thief? Where's the proof? Was he stealin' a hoss at the time? If so, whose hoss? And where's the hoss at now?"

Simpson the Elder had also recovered his wits: "You turned your son over to be hanged—we all understood that. How come you did that if you didn't think he was guilty?"

"I've found out the truth—that's why. And you men will hear it. You'll hear every word of it from my own lips. You're still the sheriff, Larabee. And I'm givin' myself up to you."

"I'll be caterwopously damned if I understand you, Chief!" Larabee cried. "If you figured we wasn't goin' to hang your son, you're mistaken. We was performin' that thar very act, after allowin' him all night to pray for his black, rotten soul.

"We was doin' the job up right, if I do say so, and Harry would be swingin' up thar right now, if it hadn't been for this double-crossin' little coot standin' thar yankin' at his mustache."

Swig flared up belligerently. "I know'd Harry was right all along," he said stoutly. "That's why I called a halt to the ceremony." This was a slight perversion of the truth, but it came in well at the moment. At least it forestalled any further accusations from Big Larabee. "Harry's innocent. His dad says so, and that proves it enough for me."

"Innocent!" Larabee cried, his rage returning. "Didn't he confess with his own mouth?"

"He lied," the Chief said. "He killed that breed for a reason.

"The breed was a damned rustlin' coyote. He was rustlin' one of our own broncs—a bronc with the Morrel brand!"

Grannas whistled. The two Simpsons emitted suppressed oaths. And although she knew nothing of what the palaver was about, the squaw emitted a grunt—the same kind of grunt that her tremendous diaphragm had given vent to before, the grunt of a maddened she-bear.

"You say the Injun was in the act of rustlin' a hoss, a Morrel hoss, branded as same?" Simpson the Elder asked.

"If that's so, they's somethin' powerful queer," Larabee said. "Why in tarnation didn't the boy tell us that in the first place?"

"Because he wanted to save his dad from what he thought would be disgrace," the Chief announced.

"You disgraced!" Grannas objected. "What-all's got into you, Chief? You're sure talkin' a pretty daft line of talk."

"Men," the Chief said quietly, "I have a confession to make—a confession which will undo the work I've done for the past thirty years. But I want to make it in front of all my deputies—the boys who have rode over desert and mesa with me for all the days I've been Chief.

"And to that end, I'd admire for three or four of you to ride out and gather in the boys I have spread around the range in the hunt for Ladley. There's no more need of their trailin' for that killer. My son will get him." He said this with an air of proud assurance.

"Go out and call 'em all back—tell 'em their Chief wants for to meet 'em at Trade Rat Gulch in the ole sheep-ranch. You'll find some on the other side of the Big Mesa, some down Desolation Flats way, some combin' the arroyos over by Soda Mountain.

"Order 'em all to congregate here. Until they come, Larabee, I'm your prisoner."

Larabee was standing facing the Chief, an incredulous and startled look on his face.

"I'd admire to ask one question, Chief," he said. "Before the Simpsons and Grannas here ride out to gather in your deputies."

The Chief looked at him, waiting.

"Was that thar bronc which the Papago hoss-thief was rustlin', was it a calico?"

"It was."

Larabee's eyes narrowed. The bearded, grizzled old rancher challenged the gaunt old sheriff with a level, unwinking stare. Then quietly he said:

"I reckon it was a lame calico, Chief?"

"It was."

Larabee's hard wrinkled mouth was set like a steel trap. For a moment more he gazed out of narrowed eyes at the man who had for thirty years been their leader in many man-hunts and many lynchings.

Then he said without turning: "You two Simpsons and Grannas ride out and gather in the posses, like the Chief ordered. Until you come back here I'll keep him prisoner."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THIRST THREATENS THE GUNMAN.

CONCHA knew well enough that she had a desperate task before her. If she had not already shown her hand to Gentle Ladley it was conceivable that she could have played a very simple trick on him.

She could pretend that she was in love with him. Much could be gained by that. But in his first visit to her shack Concha had prevented him from killing Harry Morrel; she had actually threatened him with a gun.

But she was helped in her game by a basic trait of Ladley's character. He was a criminal type, true to form in many ways. As I have pointed out, he was a man of inordinate conceit, a trait common to criminals. It has been affirmed by psychologists that the trait that makes a man commit a crime in the first place is in many cases, his conceit.

In a word, it was easy for Ladley to believe that she was in love with him. It is easy for any man to believe a girl is in love with him, when she tells him so.

His conceit blinded him. The fact that she had fought him off once before at the point of a gun was belittled when he reflected that she could not bear to see a wounded man shot to death. It was too horrible for any woman to stand.

On his second visit she had fled from him

for the simple reason that she had in the meantime found out that he was an arch-criminal. Then his fascination, he argued to himself, had commenced to work upon her.

It worked on other women. What could be so indomitable about this particular one! She was intrigued by his romantic and bloody history.

At any rate, Ladley did not propose to argue the matter with her. He would find out soon enough. If she loved him so much that she was willing to ride with him in his escape to Mexico, he would prove it on the instant.

He was ready to go. He must go—riding hell-bent on a straight southward trail now that the posse had been side-tracked. If she had spoken the truth she would come without any further palaver.

"Come on, senorita," he had said, the moment that old Morrel had left their cabin and galloped his horse off for the sheep-ranch to save his son. "We're hitting the trail right now. Get some cans of food, fill up our canteens, water my horse, and one of your own—pronto now."

She was thus thrown precipitously into the dilemma: Should she fight him now—in that little cabin? Or should she follow him south into the desert plain, and trust to Heaven that something would happen?

Obviously she could not trick him into staying in that cabin another moment. And obviously she could not fight him, and confess that she had lied. She had started her desperate game, and it was up to her to go through with it.

But from then on she fought a fight, matching all the wiles, and wit, and cajolery of a woman in hideous danger, against a murderous criminal, who was blinded by conceit, harried by many fears, exhausted by many days of thirst, and hot sun, and rocky trail, and pursuing horsemen.

The fact was, although she did not know it, as she started out on that dreadful journey, the odds were very much on her side. Her wits were as keen as steel. His were befuddled, now by suspicion of her, now by fear that the posse would again get his trail, now by fear of a greater adversary which he might have to face in the desert between the Big Mesas and the sierras of Sonora County, Mexico—the unbeatable adversary, thirst.

With these odds she started out, saddling one of her white broncs, an Indian pony. From that moment on she won every trick. The first trick was to scribble something on the door of her shack; it was something that could not be seen in the moonlight, but under the glare of the sun the next morning, the first man that came to her door read:

> I want help. Follow tracks. Clip-toe and seven nail heads in fullering of off forefoot.

Thus she described the shoe she had recently put on one of her broncs—the one she rode that night.

It took them till morning to go down the Big Mesa switch backs, which were rough trails made by mule-deer and Indians. At dawn they were out on the plain.

So far as Ladley could see, there was not the sign of a rider on the vast sunlit expanses of the mesa bluffs. In the early light everything up there was as clear as if seen through a diamond lens. The country ahead of them however presented a different problem; it was a limitless expanse of heated mist, now gray, now mauve, then pink, then glaring white, so white as to blind their eyes.

The little water they had packed lasted them but a short while; for they had to take constant swigs to fortify themselves against the growing heat. And Ladley had been prodigal with his supply all night, due partly to a natural, nervous thirst that had taken hold of him, and partly to the fact that he believed what the girl told him when she said they would pass a waterhole shortly after sunrise.

He began to reflect about that promise now. If she had lied to him, it would be a definite proof of her trickery. If not, it would be a very plausible proof that she was in earnest. Else why would she be helping him to escape to Mexico—and elude that posse?

At nine o'clock—as she had estimated—they came to a dry river, rode along the bowlder wash for a few miles, and present-

ly found a pool caught in a clay basin deep in a red-walled gorge.

The depth of that gorge and the possibility of enemies lurking in the side-draws gave Ladley pause. He could be easily convinced that the girl was in love with him, but he could not so easily be led into a trap.

Instead of riding down into the gorge himself, he sent the girl down.

"Water that bronc of yours," he said, "bring me back a canteen, then take my horse down. I'll stay on watch up here. Can't take any chances on some one trailing after us."

By this he gave the girl to understand that he was going to watch the sage-plain across which they had ridden. He did not mention the fact that there might be enemies hiding down in the gorge.

But this made no difference to Concha. She had her plan well worked out, and she proceeded to put it into operation. When she went down to the pool, she watered her horse, and took a big drink herself, besides filling both canteens. Then she returned to the rim of the gorge to get Ladley's bronc.

"Where's the drink?" Ladley asked.

"I left the canteens down there. I'll get them next time."

"What the hell did you do that for? I'm half crazy for a drink. I reckon you forgot it on purpose?"

"Yes, I left the canteens there on purpose," she answered casually.

"You think you're going to plague me, you little bat—or else you want me to go down there and get my own drink? Which is it?"

"Neither. I suspect that water. My father, who was a doctor, described the taste of gyp water to me. I have an idea there's copper in it."

Ladley stared out of pallid eyes. His face whitened, and he wiped his forehead as if there had been sweat there. But it was dry and hot.

"How 'll you find out?" he asked finally. "We've got to have water—"

"I'll see if your bronc drinks," she replied. "Mine only stuck its nose into the brim. I could see it wasn't drinking."

"You mean the horse can judge?"

"My bronc can. And yours looks as if it had some desert savvy."

"Go ahead down; fill my canteen, anyway."

She returned to the pool, this time leading Ladley's mount.

He watched her with blood-drained eyes. It seemed as if she had dwindled into a distant speck—a live coal in a furnace of slag. The orange red walls of the chasm wavered with heat. He watched while his jaw hung open, the panic of thirst coming over him before the thirst itself. His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth.

This panic had not taken hold of the girl—for the simple reason that she knew she had all the water she wanted. There was not a pool of purer water in the whole desert.

Again she drank, taking many swigs, kneeling down and burying her face in the crystal pool. Ladley, of course, had the impression that she was testing the water.

She let the horse thrust its nose into the brim, and if Ladley could have seen clearly enough down in that wavering blaze of red sunlight, he could have detected the swelling and contraction of the horse's belly as it drank and sighed.

But the girl stood with her arm over the horse's neck, and before it had its fill she drew the creature back. Then standing between the horse and the pool she played another one of her tricks, a trick she had planned as her trump card when she left her ranch on the Big Mesa.

She took off her sombrero and filled it with water, then poured out a dose from a bottle of an anodyne she used in her veterinarian practice. It was a sedative composed of powdered opium, camphor, and ginger.

It was not enough to hurt the little bronc; a horse can stand a lot of opium. But it was enough to keep Gentle Ladley from getting very far on his way to Mexico.

She returned to the barranca rim, and facing the steady fire of his pale, maddened eyes, she said quietly:

"The critter wouldn't drink — even though I tried to coax it with my hat full of water."

Ladley licked his teeth, his dry tongue sticking against the hanging lip. Finally he said, as if without breath:

"Give me my canteen."

"Here it is, but I forgot to empty it—I must empty it."

"No, by Heaven! Give it to me."

He snatched it from her hand, uncorked it, and held it to his lips.

"Don't drink!" she cried. "I beg you. You'll be tortured worse than burning alive!"

He did not tilt the canteen. He just held it there, his eyes bulging, the touch of the pure, cool water upon his tongue. He was like Tantalus in hell.

"We'll ride on, heading west," she cried excitedly. "I know of another water-hole."

He took the canteen from his lips—pushing it away as if it took all the strength in his arm.

"Head west!" he repeated hoarsely, fixing her with his frenzied eyes. "No, by the Eternal! You ain't going to lead me into the hands of a posse! You ain't going to trick me, so help me God! We head south, water or no water!"

Then, to prevent himself from succumbing to the hideous temptation of drinking that "copper" water he turned the canteen downward so that a crystal jet gurgled out and down on the hot sand.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE CHIEF'S TRIAL.

BIG LARABEE, Swig, and old Phineas Morrel returned to the sheep ranch, followed by the two Papagoes.

When the chief saw the shaman and his squaw riding after them on their ratty cayuses he swore.

"Wait till I get rid of these two pests," he said.

The two Indians rode up to them.

"What-all do you Injuns want now? Didn't you hear what was said up thar? Are you deef?"

"Your kinsman was a hoss-thief," Swig added. "Which means you don't git no revenge nor nothin'. It likewise means you vamose. Anything more which will happen, will happen—without it's concernin' you."

"Your son kill my kinsman!" the aged shaman reiterated stubbornly. "Poor Papago want payment."

The chief closed one eye, and riveted the Indian with the other. "It 'pears to me," he said, "that I know what you Injuns are after. You understand your kinsman was stealin' a hoss—my hoss? One which was branded? You savvy that makes him hoss-thief? That he'd of been given the hemp by any one—by me, myself—if I'd caught him?"

"He was hoss-thief, hy-hu-skookum," the old buzzard rejoined. "But your son shed 'im blood—must have payment."

The chief disregarded this. The statement had been so often repeated that it no longer retained its meaning.

"And does that ole horse of a squaw understand the same thing?" he asked. "Her brother was a rustler—and deserved bein' croaked."

The shaman nodded his head. "She understand 'im truth. Tom Gopher was hoss trader. Make 'im much money with cuitans from desert which he break to saddle. All the time give squaw money for buy food and red-eye and phonograph."

"I suppose you're tryin' to stipulate that the thievin' breed was her only means of support?" the chief said sardonically.

The Papago turned to his relative. There was an exchange of grunts and earthquakes—this time more gentle on the part of the volcanic mountain of flesh.

"She say yes. Your son kill her brother, who support her. Must have payment—if not in blood, then some way."

"What does she mean by that?" the chief asked shrewdly. "I suppose she expects me to support her all her life."

Again there was the exchange of Papago grunts and woofs and sniffs.

"You, or your son," the old shaman stipulated.

"My son supportin' a squaw, ay?" the chief snorted. "Well, that don't sound so good."

The two Indians palavered some more. And the light which comes with the thrill of barter burned in the squaw's eyes.

"She say a peace-gift—heap big gift make payment for dead Indian."

"How big a gift?" the chief asked non-committally.

This time they palavered interminably. The white men grew impatient, the chief apprehensive. He feared that they had some inkling of the fact that he would pay anything they asked.

Then finally the aged Papago turned, and rubbing his shriveled hands humbly and nodding his head, he suggested: "She is satisfy with good case pale-face whisky."

Larabee and Swig Moran roared. But the chief did not take the matter so lightly. It was a matter of very serious import to him and to his son and to his people.

"I'll go her one better than that," he said. "Which she may not enjoy it so much as a case of red-eye, but it 'll stand her in good stead. A sheepman down in Cowskull Barranca died a month or so ago, and left me his ranch. I'll deed it over to her—and knowin' her propensity for mutton, and likewise observin' her physical brawn, I figure she'll make good use of the ranch and its stock."

The old shaman interpreted this to the plaintiff. Then:

"She accepts peace-gift," he said. "Sheep ranch good peace gift, and she make 'im Papago tribes keep peace—and forget. No scalp 'im lonely prospector, or rancher, or posadero. But," he added humbly, smiling through the broken yellow teeth, "she like to know—does she get 'im case whisky?"

"She gets that as a bonus likewise," the chief consented.

The shaman sat there, nodding his head excitedly, grinning, rubbing his hands. He cleared his throat in preparation to making another announcement.

"And old herald-priest Gopher," he said, "he like 'im peace-gift."

"What the hell do you want?" the chief asked.

"He like 'im barrel gin."

The white men roared with laughter. Even the chief smiled a grim, sardonic smile. He turned to little Swig Moran.

"Swig, I delegate you to go by and by to my ranch, and to deliver one of my barrels of likker to this ole lobo. You savvy that, you?" he said to the shaman. "Swig he give you barrel from my stock. But you better go with him, or most of the barrel will be inside Swig afore he delivers the goods."

A day elapsed. Swig Moran, Big Larabee and the chief waited in the Mexican's sheep ranch, while from hour to hour the chief's deputies rode in from all corners of the range. It was a peculiar gathering. An air of anxiety, of utter distraction, of doom hung over the whole gang. In every man's mind there were vital questions:

Why had the chase for Gentle Ladley been abandoned?

Why had the chief sent a big detail of the posse on the wrong trail?

Why had he freed Harry, who had confessed to a cold-blooded killing?

What was the "confession" their honored chief was going to make?

And where was that big rusty star he always wore on his vest?

But these questions remained unanswered. Swig Moran kept his mouth shut as tight as a clam; Larabee would say nothing; and no one dared speak to the chief.

The only one who was at all disposed to talk was the little breed sheep rancher; and the burden of most of his announcements was that he was being eaten out of house and home by a troop of hungry loboes, pillaging from him under the guise of justice. He might as well go back to Mexico, where this practice was engaged in openly.

Toward sunset of that next day all of the chief's men, some thirty riders who had followed him through the desert and cañon and over sierras for thirty years in the work of clearing the range of its lawlessness, were gathered at Trade Rat Gulch.

Big Larabee ordered them all to congregate in the corral in front of the main ranch house. He then called inside to the chief.

Old Phineas Morrel, disheveled and in rags from that break-neck ride he had taken through the thorn and mesquite when riding to save his son, appeared on the steps. His head was bared, and the

rays of the sunset lighted the snow-white mane of hair; they lighted the eagle eyes, making a picture there of a ragged, proud giant that no man of that big posse would ever forget.

The chief looked down at the group of respectful faces. The air was cool, dreadfully silent. He did not have to speak loudly; he spoke as if addressing himself only to Big Larabee, who was standing by his side, Big Larabee on whose bearskin vest that rusty star gleamed in the sunset.

"I want to make a statement to you-all," the chief began. "To you, Larabee, as sheriff, and to you men as representin' the range and its law. It's a statement which concerns only me, who you-all have called your sheriff and your chief for thirty year. It's time you knew it. And when I tell you it 'll clear up a lot of questions that must of come into your minds. I mean questions concernin' why I give up my sheriff's star—and why my son Harry wasn't lynched."

"We understand that well enough, chief," Larabee said. "It was because you couldn't go on with your duty. No man could lynch his own son. We got that plain enough."

"Then you got it all wrong," the chief said. "I could of gone through with it easy enough. Would I of showed yaller then? No, by God, you men hear me! I'd have hanged him. I'd have hanged him even if he was my own son, so help me God. Just because I was his father—that weren't the reason I had to quit. There was another reason, something not one of you hombres knows about."

He looked with fierce burning eyes at each one of them. "Now, you men get this," he said. "When I was tryin' my son for killin' a Injun I knew that I myself was guilty. Yes, much guiltier than him. I myself am a killer. Now stare, and gape, and whistle; but it's the truth."

"Who did you kill?" one of the posse asked.

"I reckon you mean the men you've lynched in the past," Grannas interposed. "Yes—we-all understood that."

"I don't mean that. I killed two men—and with a six-gun."

"Maybe so," Simpson the elder put in. "But it must of been done in justice. We-all know you, chief."

"Wait until I tell you," the old white-maned giant said. "It's a story that none of you men know—maybe you heard about it a long time past, but you've forgot it by now. Every one's forgot it.

"Might some of you oldest muckers were in the country at the time—thirty year ago—and might you heard of a raid on a Morrel outfit in which the owner, my brother, was killed, his stock all rustled, his house burned down about his haid? No, I reckon it was too long ago."

"Too long," Simpson the elder admitted. "And they was lots of raidin' in those days afore you was sheriff."

Morrel continued:

"The two men as did this wasn't rustlers. They did it in spite. A fist fight started it. My brother got the best of 'em. They came back at him later and finished him. And when I came over from Texas for to kill 'em both, they snuck off for Mexico.

"But I got the description of 'em pretty accurate from a barkeep and a herder. And I kep' that description in my brain like a man will keep a ole photograph next to his heart. Further and more, I kep' my revenge locked up here right under where for thirty year I wore a sheriff's star."

"You mean you found 'em after these thirty years, chief?" Swig said. "And killed the stinkin' coyotes? Well, we're right glad to hear it."

"Who was they?" a voice from the crowd called.

"Now, wait. I've got lots more to tell first. Years went by, and then I found 'em in a saloon on the desert's edge. I went under the fool notion that they wouldn't know me. I got 'em in a game—thinkin' when the crowd cleared out of the saloon I'd kill 'em both.

"You see, I was the sheriff then, had been for many a year, and the range trusted me, looked up to me, made me judge over 'em all. And one of the main things I did in this range was to stop all feuds, and hang any man that killed another—

be it because of feud, or barroom fight, or cards, or anything else. And I got order in this here range where before I came a pony express rider wasn't safe on the range—"

"We witness to that, chief," Simpson the elder said. "Now that you're sheriff us prospectors are safe with our gold dust—even in the Big Mesas."

"All right, men," the chief said. "You will understand then why it was I kept that thar revenge of mine locked up in my heart. I didn't tell Harry about it; I knowed he'd of carried the feud out in the open and made a murderer outen hisself. I didn't tell nobody. Then came the unlucky day when I found them two reptiles who had killed my brother."

"And you plugged 'em, chief?" Swig said eagerly.

"No, not then. Some of you men will recollect hearin' of another fight. It was ten years ago, in a desert saloon. I took off my star—and, as I said, I got 'em in a game. I told 'em a false name so's they wouldn't know I was a Morrel.

"But some fool barkeep spilled the beans, and warned 'em to watch their step. I was the sheriff, he said, the chief, the Morrel that all men was afeared of. So we played cards, they knowin' I was goin' to kill 'em both—"

"And you dumped 'em—ay, chief—dumped 'em good and pretty!" Swig cried with tremendous enthusiasm.

"No. I was takin' my time. Didn't know they suspected. Then one of 'em, while shufflin', drops a card, reaches to the floor to pick same up, and afore his hand appears he blazes away at me with his gun under the table.

"A slug gets me in the hip, another under the ribs, another in my groin. I drop to the floor. The fandango hall clears out. The two gunmen and I myself don't have no doubts whatsomever that I was done for."

Many of the deputies knitted their brows and gasped angrily; Swig yanked fiercely at his mustache.

"One more shot in my chest would of finished me," the chief said, "and put me out of my misery. But those bloodthirsty killers wanted to torture me in my misery. They just waited there, standin' over me, gloatin', spittin', proddin' me with their boots. They got a jug of red-eye, and started to guzzle and laugh and git drunk.

"One of 'em was scairt of the crowd comin' back and takin' 'em prisoners. But the crowd was a bunch of yaller-livered breeds, and the two hellbenders knew it. One of 'em was too drunk to be afraid, drunk with red-eye and with triumph. So they tortured me for a long while—me lyin' there half unconscious, half mad with pain—too feeble to raise my haid. So help me, I couldn't raise my haid, or my arms—even when they taunted me about my brother who they killed!"

"Go on, chief," the crowd prompted. "Tell us the rest."

"After what seemed many hours—years—a doctor comes along, the doctor from the Big Mesas, and if he hadn't of performed a miracle or two I'd never be here speakin' to you gents. He blunders into the place, not thinkin' there'd be any danger to hisself or to his little gal who had come with him, with bandages and water and such.

"The hellbenders get scairt, because he was a big hombre and fightin' mad. They hop to their cayuses. They didn't even dast stop long enough to put that final slug in my chest which they promised."

"You mean they got away, Chief?" Swig cried in exasperation.

"They got away for a while. But they know'd I was on their trail. I announced that thar prophecy to them, and later to the doctor. I didn't send no posse. I announced that it was my own personal fight—over a card game—and no posse was wanted.

"I reckon the hellbenders heard that statement, and it got on their nerves. They know'd I'd get 'em sooner or later. I figure they just about went daft, expectin' me to show up in some Mexican village, or wherever else they were at.

"In fact they went so daft fearin' I'd trail 'em to the end of the world that they came back to free 'emselves. You know what I mean: to kill me."

"They came back, did they?" Swig ex-

claimed with a renewed enthusiasm. "Blooey!"

"I heard just the other day that my son got into a jam down to Pedro's bar. He and two muckers from the desert plagued this Gentle Ladley. I wasn't as interested in Gentle Ladley as you men think.

"I was interested in them two muckers, because you yourself, Swig, described 'em to me: An hombre with hairy wrists, and a bull neck; another hombre with red-rimmed eyes, and a Adam's apple.

"I know'd they'd come back for to kill me. Ain't nothin' else in the world—not even a gold mine—would of brought 'em back otherwise. They wouldn't of dast."

"Ladley killed them two men, chief," a deputy called out. "Is that what you been leadin' up to?"

"Ladley did not kill 'em. He might of killed 'em. But I wanted to get 'em with my own hand. That's the only kind of revenge that counts. I got 'em afore Ladley did. It was me, gents, that killed Calibers and Trommer."

For a moment the gang was stricken dumb.

Swig Moran's breath was coming in gasps from his mouth, a mouth that was pulled all out of shape by his nervous plucking at the mustache. "Zowie!" he breathed ecstatically. "That sure makes a gallumpin' good bit of hist'ry, Chief!"

Big Larabee's brows were knitted. "What I can't quite understand," he said, "is how come that hombre Trommer wrote that thar statement he wrote when he was dyin'. It put all the blame on Gentle Ladley."

He turned to the others: "You gents remember Trommer—which was the last to be killed, he was found in a gulch near the ranch where his pard had just been croaked. And they was a map which Trommer had wrote somethin' on it.

"And do you remember what it was he wrote?" the old Chief said. "I remember well enough. My son showed it to me, when we met in the desert while we was both trailin' that lame calico.

"'*I got what I deserved*'—that's what the hellbender wrote. I'll remember the words to my dyin' day, so help me. They was music to my ears! And he wrote furthermore: '*I been through years of hell knowin' this would come!*' Ain't that what he wrote? And he said, '*Tried to get him first.*' You remember that—any of you?"

Swig nodded; so did Larabee, and many others.

"We all thought he was referrin' to Gentle Ladley," Swig said. "But it's clear enough now. He was referrin' to you. No doubt about that."

"We got it all straightened out exceptin' one point, Chief," one of the deputies piped up. "And it's kind of an important point: Just how come that lame calico which we was all trailin' got out of your hands?"

"As you men must understand, now that you know who killed Calibers and Trommer, it was me who rode that calico. I had my own favorite hoss besides, but when I went to the Bar-L I left my hoss in a gully near by, and then picked it up again after I'd killed Calibers.

"I rode out toward the desert trailin' Trommer. I took the calico with me intendin' to kill it, and bury it. But there weren't time. You caught up with me. I just had time to tether the calico to some brush. Then when I went back searchin' for it, it had got away."

The old man concluded simply: "My son learned this; I take it he learned it from the little gal on top of the Big Mesa thar. He went after the hoss—and shot it."

"Which we're all admirin' Harry for what he done!" Swig cried triumphantly. "Only he must of thought you committed a crime. Reckon he didn't know it was a good, respectable feud!"

"It was a crime!" the Chief shot back hotly. "I myself have worked for thirty years to make feud killings a crime. I've made that thar law, and I'm caught in my own net—you-all kin see. And that's why I'm givin' myself up to you, Larabee, you who's now sheriff of this here range—and to you men who are now his deputies!"

He looked from one man to the other—from the bearded giant, Larabee, to little Swig, to the group of faces gazing up at him.

"Now, then, Larabee," he concluded

simply, "I'm standin' before you as a judge. I've confessed. Are you satisfied?"

"He better be," little Swig mumbled behind his mustache, "or else I'll slug the overgrown old wart!"

But there was no occasion to slug the giant Larabee now. He was satisfied. The mask of assumed authority, of fury at injured dignity, of suspicion—that mask was gone from his face, leaving the big, grizzled, honest, homely face of an Arizona cattle-king.

He stroked his beard, the fingers coming down and pausing in the knot where the hair was tied underneath his massive jaw. He had been very important for a short span of time. He had been sheriff of the range for a few hours.

In that duration of office he had made a rather blundering attempt to hang a man, and he was now thanking God that he had blundered. But before he was through with this job of sheriff he proposed to accomplish one act. And he would accomplish it without blundering. It was an act which he knew would be backed up by every cowboy or bronc-twister on that range.

"I want to announce afore I give up my job as sheriff," he said, "which same I've held for a day—instead of thirty years like the real Chief here—I say I want to announce to you-all that I've heard the confession of Phineas Morrel, and considered same—and you men have heard same.

"This here is the identical kind of trial, conducted at the moment that the prisoner is in our possession same as all trials have been conducted by the Chief for years past. You gents who may be considered my deputies kin back me up in this, same as if you was a jury. Just us few here are enough.

"We've heard the evidence. And I hereby pronounce judgment, which is that Phineas Morrel killed them two desert rats for motives that was justifiable. No matter if he thinks it was an old-time feud.

"The hellbenders deserved pluggin', expected it, came back for to prevent it by killin' the Chief—and got dumped good and clean. That thar's a simple story, the moral of which is that Phineas Morrel is Not Guilty."

The crowd of deputies concurred with this judgment, giving vent to enthusiastic oaths. Little Swig Moran waved his hat in the air, and whooped. The whole posse knew perfectly well that that little ceremony was enough to free the old Chief beyond any further cavil. For that offense, every one was perfectly assured, he could never again be put in jeopardy.

"And I consider that my last duty as sheriff of Neutral Saddle," Larabee said as he unfastened the star from his bearskin vest, and pinned it on the breast of the old Chief.

This act was acclaimed by a great shout.

There was, in fact, no dissenting voice in that company, except, perhaps, the voice of the breed sheepherder mumbling to himself.

"Now they will all get drunk, and there will not be a bottle of cuevo left in my whole house! Such is this great thing they call Justice!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THIRST.

OUT on the burning alkaline plain that stretches from the Big Mesas to the border, two riders were pressing on. Their mounts, trotting laboriously in the soft silt, churned up a cloud of dust so thick and white that it gave the horses the appearance of wading stirrup-high in steam.

It took sturdy broncs to stand a mist like that, parching their mouths, nostrils, throats. It took sturdier men. A man starting out on that desert was beaten before he started unless his nerve was bolstered up with the promise of an unlimited water-supply.

Concha saw the effect this ordeal was having on her captor. He was no longer mild or gentle; his eyes were no longer the innocuous blue of a child's for which he was so famous.

They were the eyes of a rattler who has been half crushed. When he spoke to the girl he snarled, and his thickened tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. The blue of his eyes turned gray, rimmed with a raw, burning red.

But with the desperation of one who is hounded by all mankind, he kept doggedly on, his head lolling with every movement of the horse. He would fight it out for a day, perhaps two days, because the night would turn cold. After that they could take a chance on branching off in search of water. Until then the course was straight south.

It was conceivable that this frantic determination might have saved him his life. But something happened which made Ladley's own will-power as futile and ridiculous as the will-power of a blowfly bumping its head against a window pane.

His mount gave out.

When they left that last fateful waterhole in the gulch the creature seemed to have been instilled with a fine zeal. It went cantering along over the dunes like an Arabian steed inspired with unlimited spirit and strength.

This preliminary effect of the drug lasted for but a short while, however. Presently Ladley found it necessary to keep his heels digging into the animal's flanks to urge it on; then he had to thwack it with the bight of his reins.

They covered a lot of trail before the end came. The horse stumbled heavily, was yanked to its feet, and floundered on for a space, struggling in the dunes, churning up a cloud of alkali.

It was like a ship that had sprung a leak, a ship that banged heavily against the seas, unable to answer her rudder, unable to lift herself over the rolling swells.

Then abruptly the little creature plunged forward, doubling up its front feet, and tumbling over on its side like a steer brained in the slaughter house.

Thrown from the saddle, Ladley picked himself up, staggered to his feet, and stood staring incredulous and dazed at the drugged horse.

The disaster seemed to impress itself upon his consciousness slowly. He went to the horse's head, tried to yank it up, then kicked at it.

"It's no use," the girl said. "That was copper water; no doubt about that now."

Ladley looked up at her. He did not seem to see her; he was looking through her and beyond her. In a confused, bewildered way, he remembered that she had held her sombrero to this horse, enticing it to drink. But it was like the memory of a dream, the details of which had long since faded away.

"You said the nags wouldn't drink; you even tried to make this one drink, and you said it wouldn't."

"I guess perhaps they must have tried it after all," she replied. "This nag of mine will go down next."

He was on the point of flying into a rage, rushing toward the girl as if to rend her in pieces. But her last remark stopped him. What if they lost both horses!

"You think that nag drank! You mean — we'll be left out here to die!"

"Looks that way," she said calmly. "I thought both of these critters, being bronchos with a good lot of desert savvy, would know gyp water when they smelt it. But I'm mistaken. Looks bad."

"Bad! God! It's the end. We're goin' to roast here in the fires of hell! That's how bad it looks!"

He was clinging to her saddle now, supporting his crumpled weight, staring up at her with a dust-whitened, haggard face. She herself must have looked pretty bad, although she had managed to take sips surreptitiously from her canteen.

This and the knowledge that she could get water within a mile or two of the trail kept her fit. Ladley had been without either water or the promise of it. He was writhing in a torture that was both physical and mental.

"You don't look as if you can eat up much more trail, pard," she said. "Your face looks like a skull."

"God knows it'll be a skull before that sun goes down!" he whimpered.

"I've got a fear," she said quietly, earnestly; "a fear that you're right. A buzzard has sighted us already."

"A buzzard—where? Where's a buzzard?"

"Look up against the sun."

He turned his ashen face toward the sun, and the skin wrinkled up as if shriveling under the blaze of heat.

"Can't you see it?"

"See it! Good Lord—I'm getting too blind to see my own hands."

"The buzzard's there just the same. And it's spotted us. I can tell it's following us. If it was wheeling up there waiting for a coyote to die, it would come much lower. They stay up high when they spot a dying man."

His face sank to his arm—pressed against the leather, which burned his cheek.

"Where is it now?" he asked.

"It's coming lower."

"Lower!" he gasped miserably. "It sees me on the ground. It thinks I'm dying!"

"You are."

She saw his hand tighten on the hot pommel. The other hand clutched her frantically, like a man drowning.

"I'm not dying, by God!" he screamed. "I'll get away! I'll fight. I'll fight 'em all—buzzards and men both! They won't get me, so help me! Think I'm through? No, not by a damned sight." He pulled at her. "Help me up. Quick! I'll ride behind you."

She had an impulse then of shoving him back to the sand. But she thought better of it. As yet his defeat—at least from a physical point of view—was not accomplished. Mentally, perhaps, she had him beaten. But she could tell by the grip of his hands as he hauled himself up that he was by no means helpless.

"Are you going to help me?" she heard him snarl. "You aren't helping me. You're soldiering. Damned if I don't think you're going to ride off and forsake me. That's your game—isn't it, now? But not if I know it! I know a thing or two about you double-crossing bats. Made my horse drink out of your hat—that's what you did, so you could ride off? You think you'll ride off, eh? Oh, no!"

He was behind her now, gripping her with one vise-like arm, and snatching the reins, roughly, forcibly, from her hands with the other.

As a matter of fact, his fear that she would ride off came at a very peculiar time. It was almost a coincidence. She had had that very impulse but a moment before, when he was thrown from his horse.

She knew that his horse would be unable to carry him any longer. She might have wheeled her own mount, and galloped away. But she reflected quickly that Ladley himself was not hurt. If he saw her forsaking him, his first act, even before taking another glance at his fallen mount, would have been to send a bullet whizzing after her.

She knew that danger was ever present. He was the sort of desperado that burned all his bridges after him. He would not let her get away, leaving him there without a mount, riding off to tell the nearest prospector.

When the time came for Ladley to discard her, he would discard something that could tell no tales!

They jogged on, at a much slower rate now, for the sand was fine and deep, and the weight of two riders made a big difference.

It was now the hottest part of the afternoon. The girl herself began to feel the effects of the heat, and of the salt mist. But she did not dare to reach for her flask now. She could reach for nothing. He was watching her like a hawk.

A suspicion had taken hold of him, a sort of persecution mania. Only it was not, precisely speaking, a mania. It was the truth. Everything he suspected about her was true. And every mile of trail they plowed through heightened that crazed fear, that she was, after all, tricking him.

The fact of the matter was that in his torture of thirst and spirit his pride was gradually being smothered. He began to believe that that girl could not possibly have consented to ride away to Mexico with a killer.

This began to ferment in his mind, mingling with his other torment like the recurrent image of a hideous vision in a long fever. He would watch her, watch her as a cat hovers near a mouse. The slightest confirmation, and he would draw his gun and pay her back.

That gun was one thing he watched now—like a miser in a land of thieves constantly feeling for his bag of gold. If the heat blinded him too much, a stealthy feminine hand might reach back and strip him of his one last symbol of mastery.

Concha was fully aware that her captor had an intuitive trust for his gun. His vigilance over that precious thing could not be lessened or confused by any kind of torture, or fever, or delirium. He was the kind of man who would have clung to it even when hopelessly drunk. He would cling to it in sickness, in madness.

And what's more, it was the first thing he would use when he was cornered, no matter what it was that cornered him, whether a fictitious buzzard, or a posse of riders, or a weak little girl.

They passed on, Concha wondering just what the end would be. Each hour they got farther and farther away from the country she knew, from the chance of meeting a wandering mucker or Indian. She began to reflect just how much chance there was of some one following.

What if several days elapsed before any one happened to pass her ranch where she had left that message on the door? There was, of course, the chance that old Morrel might tell his son what had happened.

There was also the chance that Harry upon being freed, would immediately return to her cabin. She rather banked on that. But what if old Morrel had not reached that lynch gang down in Trade Rat Gulch before Harry was hanged? It was, after all, a pretty slim hope.

She began to think that that little white bronc of hers would carry them both to Mexico. After a cold night Ladley would be resuscitated; he would think more clearly. He would take chances, and start in hunting for water.

The end must come while that afternoon sun was still on her side.

As they rode she noticed that Ladley was not very certain about guiding the horse. He urged it on at its laborious trot, but he was not too particular about the direction. Evidently he was only heading south by one method of direction, the sun.

There were no points on the horizon by which to orient himself. The Sangre de Cristo range in Mexico was wrapped in a confusing haze of blue mirages. The girl was keen-eyed enough to notice that Ladley was not shaping his course by any particular peak of that range.

He was just going doggedly now southeast, now south, now southwest, threading the mesquite patches, rounding small picachos of red rock, following the shallow dry river washes.

She noticed that he paid no attention to the mirages. They lay on all sides now, long narrow strips of pale blue, simmering in the heat, accentuating the stark crimson of the rocks and earth. At times when they came to flat spaces, the whole surface of the ground seemed to undulate with a play of colors now like the path of a sunset on a sea, then as the riders approached, they seemed like the variegated colors of a gasoline flame.

To Ladley the Indian phrase "laughing water" took on a new significance. This was the real laughing water. It mocked and laughed with a soundless demoniac laugh turning from the cool enticing blue of water to the blue of burning gas.

Concha noticed that the mirages were beginning to get on his nerves. No, he did not ride toward them to prove that they did not exist. He began to thread his way over the plain, actually avoiding them. Perhaps this was due to a perversity in his nature: his pride still rode him. He wanted to show the girl that he was one man—who, although tortured with the fear of dying with thirst—could not be fooled by a mirage.

Their course took them into a wide bowlder wash, which, although at first shallow enough to seem part of the level plain, gradually deepened to a canyon. Far off to the right and left were low adobe banks, perhaps the height of a man. Presently these deepened, and became dotted with clumps of mesquite, and crucifixion thorn. The floor of the canyon itself was as flat as a plain, and dead ahead was an arc of the horizon.

They rode on, Ladley keeping to the center of the river bed; for he wanted a lot of space on either side of him. The girl did not know the country. They were nearing the border, and the chances of being found now were getting slimmer and slimmer.

But at the same time Ladley was getting more and more befuddled, crazed with

the fear of thirst. If something could happen while he was still beside himself with that fear, there was a faint hope that Concha might escape. If he had one swig of water to tide him over until the cold night, to clear out his brain, then that hope was gone.

As she was reflecting over this state of affairs, something did happen. But it was a disaster—not a disaster for Ladley, but for the girl, and it promised to bring utter defeat to all her schemes, and her desperate fight for liberty.

Over there toward the low western bank of the canyon, she saw a little water-hole.

It was a narrow strip of blue, a pool dammed up by bowlders, and dunes, and chaparral, and probably only a few inches deep. Near by there were the adobe ruins of an Indian xacalli. This ruined hut, and the fact that the blue was not shimmering was enough to prove to the girl that it was real water.

A moment after she had seen it, she felt Ladley's arm stiffen. The horse stumbled to a walk, then stopped, its head turned toward the west, its nostrils dilated and sniffing. The fact of the matter was Ladley had not led the horse into that canyon, it was the horse that was doing the leading.

"Where you going, pard?" the girl asked breathlessly.

"Over there. We're saved. Can't you see it?"

"I see a xacalli—and I wouldn't be surprised if the Sheriff of Neutral Saddle has posted a guard there."

"No matter—I'll take a chance on that. I've got to have a drink, or I'll go mad."

"A drink of what?"

"Of that water—don't care if it's gyp water, or copper, or anything else. I'm going crazy."

"You're crazy already."

"What do you call that—that stuff over there under those banks?"

"I call it mesquite."

"I mean that blue, that stretch of cool blue?" He pressed his heels into the eager mount, and headed across the river bed.

But the girl put her hand on the reins.

"Look here, pard. I didn't know you were that far gone. Can't you tell a mirage when you see one?"

"A mirage?" he stammered. "That ain't a mirage, damn you! It's water, so help me God!"

"You're mad. You always find a mirage right under adobe cliffs like that where the air's shut out, and it's hottest. Don't ride there, pard, I beg you."

"Why do you beg me—a half a mile and I'll prove it!"

"You'll prove you're crazy! Don't you know that's one thing a prospector never dares to do—to ride to a mirage. It means your mind goes over the brink."

His hand, which was thrust in front of her, holding the reins, shook as if a galvanic current had gripped it. The wrist curled.

She put her hand gently upon his. "Ride on. Don't take a chance on that adobe hut. Some one will get you. And don't take a chance on that—"

No, he could take a chance on the hut perhaps, it was obviously a deserted ruin. But he could not take a chance on proving himself mad.

He pressed his heels again into the mount, leading it back. He even had to lead its head around. The bronc, evidently possessed of the devil, wanted to play its part in this hideous joke. He gave it a vicious kick.

But even then it was perverse. He couldn't get it back to its trot. It shambled on sullenly, dejected and forlorn. If Ladley could have seen its head, he would have observed that it was watching that blue strip out of the corner of its eyes; and that its nostrils were distended, and sniffing frantically.

It was a turning point. The girl had won.

And the rest was pitifully easy.

They rode on, and came out of the canyon facing west with the murderous afternoon sun blazing in their faces.

"Which way are you going, pard?" the girl asked.

"South," he said doggedly. "Why do you ask that?"

"You're heading north now." She pointed to the sierra in Mexico. "Those are the Big Mesas—"

"The Big Mesas! A lie! They're the Sangre de Cristo. We're in Mexico as soon as we reach those foothills."

"You mean you're back again in the Big Mesas, where a posse is hunting for you!"

"Are you trying to tell me we've been riding north all this while?"

"You got twisted in that canyon back there."

There was little doubt about his being twisted. He had no conception of where he was—except by that sun.

"How can we be riding north with that sun on our right side?"

"Well, it's morning, isn't it?" she asked blandly.

"Morning! For God's sake! You're as daft as I am. We've been trailing for hours—all day long."

"It's morning just the same," she retorted. "You only think it's afternoon. As for me, it seems as if we've been riding a week—but I know perfectly well it's still morning."

She felt his hand falter again, and he let out a string of maddened, hysterical oaths. "We've been riding for eternity through hell!" he cried. "And the sun's still down halfway to the horizon—"

"From where it started," she added craftily. "The sun starts in the east, doesn't it? Or maybe down here it rises in the west. I've heard prospectors tell me that. If it rises in the west then you're headed all right."

"For God's sake shut up!" he cried. "That's east over there—where the sun is!" He pointed to the sun which, at four o'clock, was well down toward the western horizon.

"All right, then," she admitted gently. "Turn around and head in the right direction."

He obeyed.

From then on the girl was assured she was safe. If she could convince her captor that he was riding south to Mexico when he was now actually heading back for the Big Mesas, there was no necessity of her playing any more tricks. Ladley was done for.

They rode on, the girl anxious only that the little bronc—her bronc—would keep its strength. She herself urged it at a faster gait. Ladley, sitting behind the cantle, was no longer holding her. Her back was as hot as fire.

He stayed well behind, still holding the reins, but keeping as much space as possible between himself and the girl. But she could hear his hot breath coming in labored gasps.

She could feel his weight riding dead back there, as if her mount were carrying a heavy food-pack. The end was coming. Concha felt that if she could not steal another swig from her flask she herself must fall to the sand.

As yet the sun had lost none of its ferocity. It beat aslant underneath their sombrero brims, burning their cheeks. And added to its heat was the parched ground, the glinting sand throwing back the heat of the whole day. The girl's mouth burned with the salt mist. Every nerve in her body yearned for water.

Even the sturdy, desert bred bronc slowed down to a shuffling walk, its head hanging, its legs rickety and exhausted by the long trailing and the double weight. Finally it stopped altogether. But it had stopped because of a slight, uncertain pressure of Ladley's hands on the reins.

"What's wrong now, pard?" the girl asked.

"There's water over there," he said in a dull voice.

She looked across to a row of low orange-red mesas. She saw a small simmering mirage, with bisnaga cactus standing in the middle and reflected perfectly.

"Water!" she exclaimed with a disgusted grunt. She only wished now that it was water. She began to doubt if she could stand the two hours before sunset unless she had a drink.

She was going to taunt her captor at making so obvious a mistake, but suddenly she checked herself. Here was a chance to play one last trick.

"Go on, pard! Head for it—quick! That's water! I know it! I can tell. Thank Heaven for it—we're saved!"

With an exultant yell he turned the horse and headed for the low mesa. He

kicked at the bronc's flank viciously. He lashed at its head with the bight of his reins. He howled madly at it.

The cliffs were much farther away than either of the two riders had thought. But Ladley kept up a furious lashing and howling. His whole frame was atremble with eagerness, his voice high, shaking, piercing. The cliffs loomed high; the red mist surrounded them as the horse plowed heavily through the alkali.

"Where is it? I've lost it!" Ladley cried.

"Over there!" the girl cried tauntingly. "Can't you see it? Can't you hear it? There's a spring guzzling out of the cliff."

"Yes, I see it!" he screamed triumphantly, heading for the receding strip of blue. The horse stumbled along. It was too slow a gait for the frantic man. He leaped to the ground, and, still holding the reins, staggered on toward the base of the cliff.

He had no fear of the deep arroyos in the cliff's side. There might be a posse of fifty men hiding there. But what did that matter? It was the last thing than concerned him.

When within fifty yards of the cliff, running, stumbling, reeling on, he had his first intimation of what was happening. The desert was playing the grimmest and most hideous joke it ever plays on its lost wanderers.

There was a lagoon, sky-blue and shimmering; but he saw, or thought he saw, the edge receding like the quick recession of a breaker on the sand. But it was not exactly like a comber returning to the sea; for instead of leaving the sand black and shining in the sunlight, it left it dry. His mind shut out this horrible truth. He would reach that lagoon. He would chase it. He would run after it, even though he pursued it to the shores of hell.

The horse, responding to the yanking of the reins, and too exhausted to rear or fight, loped after the staggering man. The girl in the saddle looked down with a calm, inexorable look at the pitiful mortal below, a look that was at once serene in its triumph and yet overcast with pain.

She herself was tortured with thirst. But her own torture served only to kindle a strange sympathy for the miserable wretch reeling and gibbering down there on the sand.

She saw him run—as if blind—to the cliff. He came up sharp against a granite bowlder, and threw his arms about it. His hands dug into it as if he believed the lost lagoon were imprisoned there, and that it might gush out in response to his cries, like the Scriptural version of water gushing out of the cliffside in the wilderness in response to the staff of Moses.

His nails clutched at the obdurate granite; he tore at it; his fingers bled; his strength gave out. Groaning, he sank to the ground.

The girl dismounted and stood over him. He lay there, staring up at her, licking his dry red mouth and whimpering.

"Tell 'em to come and get me. Bring anybody. I don't care. I'm through."

The sight of the tortured burning thing at her feet was more than she could bear. She had won her great fight; there was no more doubt about that. To go on torturing any more was like kicking a man who was down.

She took her canteen—the canteen which all this time, unknown to Ladley, had carried water. There was not much water left in it, perhaps enough to save his life and hers.

She yearned, like an addict yearning for his drug, to take what there was left of that water. But how could she drink, with that man lying there, groaning and whimpering, and begging her to give him over to his enemies who would hang him?

She knelt down beside him and held up his head.

"Take a swig or two of this, hombre," she said. "Leave a swig for me."

When the lukewarm liquid touched his raw lips he straightened up, his two shaking hands gripped it, his fingers rooted about it, snatching it fiercely from her hold.

There was not much. He emptied it all in a gulp. But it was an elixir to him. His eyes flamed. He looked up at the girl, and the sudden change of his face, the return of that blood to his eyes as if a new life-giving venom were coursing through his

body, terrified her. She jumped up and backed away.

"Water!" he cried exultantly. "Where did you get that?" He looked down at the canteen in his hand as if he believed that too was a vision that would vanish into air like the mirage he had been following. "You had it all along, eh? Is that it? You double-crossing, murderous little bat! Or is it copper water?" He threw the canteen down and leaped to his feet.

She was dumfounded at the way that liquid had taken fire in him. He leaped at her like a reptile that has been lying dormant and sluggish, rising to strike. His fingers were on her throat.

"Poisoning me, that's what! First you poison my horse, then you bring me down here into hell's fire, and watch me burn awhile; then you poison me! That's the game, is it? Well, I'll show you who's winning this game. I'll show you what real torture feels like!"

He hurled her bodily to the ground. She lay there against a rock slab, bruised, stunned, horrified at this precipitous turn of fate. With a little drink of water she had brought a raving, murderous maniac back to life.

Ladley reeled off toward a clump of chaparral and ripped off a branch.

"I'll whip you to death, that's what!" he screamed, his mouth flecked with white bubbles. "And if this won't work, I'll stone you—like the cat you are!"

He lifted his trembling hand. And she took the first blow, too weak, too terrified to so much as murmur.

CHAPTER XXIX.

MIRAGE AND REALITY.

THEY had come to the base of that cliff, enticed there by the lagoon of silvery water. Neither had thought of the possibility of any one hiding in the draws that broke the mesa rim. They were both long past that fear or that hope. The girl had had a certain faint intimation that on the top of the little mesa there was a horseman riding madly. She had heard a rhythm that vibrated through her nerve-tortured body with a strange ecstasy.

It continued, remote and barely audible, as an undertone to Ladley's incoherent cries.

She had told him that she heard the sound of falling water. Perhaps he had heard it too. At any rate he believed what she said; there was the sound, the rhythm of falling water in the air.

But as they had approached the cliff the sound ceased. Concha believed it was another figment of her brain, an illusion to her ears as the mirage was to her eyes.

But that rhythmic beat of horse's hoofs had actually drifted down from the mesa-top. If Concha and Ladley had been in their right senses they would both have detected it. A man was up there, galloping his horse across the hard-packed ground of the plain on top of the little plateau.

He had sighted the two desert wanderers some time before. For hours he had been trailing them, but now that he came upon them so abruptly something caused him to rein in and watch. They were riding north, instead of south, which according to the tracks in the sand had been their direction for many miles.

The rider dismounted and crawled to the edge of the cliff. He was a tall, gaunt man with a hawklike nose and sharp glittering eyes. His right arm was bandaged; in his left he held a rifle.

When he saw that they were heading toward his mesa he crawled along the cliff-edge to the spot they were approaching. Then when they came within half a mile he assured himself that they were the two riders he wanted.

Presently he saw the man down there dismount and stagger along on foot leading the white bronc, and the girl still seated in the saddle.

He lifted his rifle, steadying it on the edge of a bowlder, and brought the sights upon that reeling, shuffling figure in the lead. But as he squinted at his target he paused a moment before firing, and said to himself:

"That hombre's dying, if I know anything. He's either drunk on sajuara sap or

gyp water—or just plain croaking with thirst."

He watched the strange actions of the fugitive a moment more. It was a diminutive figure at that distance, a little ant casting a long, grotesque shadow on the white sand.

The man with the rifle—who, needless to say, was Harry Morrel—put down the weapon a moment.

"Not much fun bumping off that hombre while he's croaking. And on the other hand it won't be much fun going back and telling my dad that I just found a dead carcass down here. I've got to sign my name on him first—before he croaks—that is all there is to to."

He took a good gulp from the flask little Swig Moran had given him. Then once again he brought the sights on the little ant down there in the dunes. The liquor steadied his hand and cleared his eye. But the range was far.

"I've got to make a good, clean shot of this," Morrel said to himself. "One shot—that's my name. No use signing all over his carcass. The dotted line is right across his forehead. That's where I'll sign."

They were much closer now, right under the cliffs, and Morrel could hear a strange cry drifting up from the depths.

"Dying—that's the word—no doubt about that. Dying of thirst. Hulloa! There he goes tumbling to his hands and knees—pounding on a rock. Thirst—I know. The buzzard up there knows, too."

Yes, there was a real buzzard up in the sky—a buzzard that had an uncanny savvy concerning the difference between a man on a horse and a man on the ground. In that part of the country a man on the ground meant a meal. A man on a horse—well, that meant a little delay, perhaps.

It was then that the girl knelt down beside her tortured enemy, and gave him that drink.

"I'll be damned!" Harry Morrel cried. "Saving his life, is she? Just like a woman!" An oath escaped his lips. He saw something happen that was very hard to believe. The "dying" man had staggered to his feet again. He had in the blink of an eye turned upon the girl. What did he think he was going to do? Kiss her? Choke her? Beat her?

The sights were focused upon him, nor was there the slightest tremor of the gunmetal. A scientist twisting the screws of a diamond lens could not have brought a tiny mote of life more clearly into his vision. Morrel saw one brilliant dot of white light—the victim's forehead—like a pin hole admitting the sun into a dark room.

Morrel squeezed the trigger.

Concha was staring up at the demon who stood before her, a stick in his hand, oaths foaming at his blistered lips. But before he brought that whip down a second time he sank abruptly to his knees.

Concha had a confused impression that on his dust-whitened forehead she had seen a mark. Some unknown power had thrust out the finger of death, and touched him there. And in the twinkling of an eye he had fallen forward, his face in the sand.

She lay there, a little away from the body of "Gentle" Ladley. She was prostrate in the hot sand, her head throbbing, her back aching as if to break, her arm stinging where she had been struck. It flittered across her consciousness that she had heard the report of a gun. But it was so infinitely remote, like some one hunting game in the distant sierras of the horizon, that she could not be quite sure.

As she lay there, her face turned upward toward the red cliffs, she saw a figure tearing down through the chaparral toward her. It was a figure bathed in the radiance of the western light, a form so dazzling that all else was dark in comparison.

She knew who it was. Her heart beat fiercely. She tossed in her bed of sand as if in a raging fever. She tried to arise to go and meet him, but a black pall settled over her, and she sank back again.

The next moment she felt a strong arm about her. Her head was pillowed on a shoulder that seemed soft and cool. A canteen of water was at her lips.

"Dear God in heaven," she murmured, "how merciful you are—to give me water and—this boy!"

THE END

Prisoners of Debt

By BEATRICE ASHTON VANDEGRIFT

IT'S a far cry from broncho-buster to boarding house biddy, but I'm the shout.

Five years ago I was seeing the world from the brake beams of a baggage car—shearing sheep in Wyoming, picking prunes in the Santa Clara, holding my own with the kind of he-men that would rather pull a gat than yawn. To-day I'm seeing the world from the kitchen stove—shearing spinach in the morning, peeling prunes in the evening, barely holding my own with the kind of he-women that would kill you with a look over an underdone egg.

I acquired the boarding house by marriage. When I took to wife the Widow Talbot I was endowed with the three story brownstone shanty overlooking Gramercy that some twenty souls called "home."

Inside a year I was soft, fat, and lazy. The most violent exercise I took was racing the gray cat to the warmest corner by the kitchen stove.

Then Aggie went. It was the shrimps, an intoxicated tin of them. I sat by the old carved bed as she lay there, green and gasping, and something gentle came over me.

"William," she whispered, "will you promise me something?"

"Sure, Aggie," I soothed, my throat choking like a mustang with the heaves. "Sure, I promise. What do you want?"

"I want you to stay here and look after these people," she said, feeble but earnest. "It's home to them, William. For fifteen years it's been home to them, and we can't turn them out. Mrs. Beamish, and Miss Meeker, and all. Promise me you'll stay."

"I'll stay, Aggie."

"Be nice to Mrs. Beamish," she cautioned, in between groans. "She pays for the whole house with that big front suite. Don't let her go, whatever happens, William."

"No, I won't let her go, Aggie."

She sighed, and her hand gripped tight inside mine.

"Don't let no one walk out on the rent," she warned me then, and went, leaving me desolate.

That was two years ago. I stuck. I promised her I would, and I stuck.

But sometimes, in the spring, when the park was bursting out in a glory of gold blossoms, and the grocer recommended dandelion greens, I would feel the old urge. Up in my attic room, in between calls for ice water and fresh bath towels, I'd sit, playing dream music on an accordion of folder postcards. Pictures of Yosemite they were, and the old Santa Fe, and spring in the Sierras. All of them places I'd seen in my younger days, from the cracks in the baggage car doors.

Sometimes I'd walk the tracks all night in the light of a May moon, with the rails shining ahead of me like a silver ladder to heaven.

And I dreamed of how I would go again some day, when I'd finished doing my duty by the boarding house. But not in the old, wild, rough way. Poached eggs and pancakes in the mornings had cured that.

De luxe, classy, genteel, I'd go over the old trails once more, seeing the world from a comfortable lower berth.

I was saving money. I'd have enough when the time came. There was only one bug in the ointment—a cunning, little one with big, saucy eyes and pert chin, and the kind of haircut that made you want to say to her, "Hey, young feller, what are *you* doing, parading around in sister's clothes?"

Frankie LaMarr was her name, and she made up music, third floor rear, and wouldn't pay her rent. I couldn't turn her out, though. You can't turn out girls with real folks back in Ohio, even if they are independent and making their own way in the city, except for contributions of fudge and five dollar checks from back home.

It was them checks that interested me. I used to go to her mornings when the mail come in, pleasant but meaningful.

"Some more mail from home, Miss Frankie?" I'd inquire, polite.

"You bet your pet toupee, old thing!" she'd retort, friendly.

"That ain't a check there, is it?" I'd inquire, not appearing interested.

"If it isn't, I'm a cross-eyed Hottentot," she'd answer, shaking the letter for signs of more.

"Well, I was just thinking, Miss Frankie," I continued, embarrassed but resolute, "that if you didn't mind, you might be putting a little of it on your back rent."

She widened her gray eyes and looked at me reproachfully.

"Oh," she intoned. "Oh, and then what about the piano?"

"Yeah, and what about it?" I swallowed.

"Don't you know that if I don't put every cent I have on it, the men'll come and haul it away and I can't finish the song and get the cool thousand Myers promised me? Don't you know that? Do you want 'em to *take away* the piano?"

From my recollection of the kind of music it produced and still smarting under several complaints issued by my prize guests regarding said instrument, it wouldn't have been a bad idea.

"And make me give up my career?" she went on, her eyes even bigger, "and lose the thousand, and not be able to pay you *any* rent—and have to go back to Ohio a failure? Do you want that, Wild Willie McGuire?"

"No," I gulped. "No, Miss Frankie. I was just suggesting a small payment. But I'll wait till you get your thousand. It can't be long now."

"You bet it can't be long," she breezed. "All I have to do is duplicate my first hit, you know—the 'Yama Yama Mamma'—and Myers 'll come across. Then when my slips come in—"

"That's all right, Miss Frankie."

"You're a real Western gentleman, Wild Will," she smiled, and flounced up to her room whence presently emerged a flock of sounds that would make a den of lions listen like a choir of larks.

Spring in the Sierras! Gentians on the hillsides! Bacon fried in the cool tang of October on the mesas!

A bell buzzed.

I wended my way up one flight to the second floor front.

It was Caroline Beamish. Like myself, she was traveled. Before her marriage to the gone but not forgotten Mr. Beamish, she had once taken a Cook's tour to Europe

during her school teaching days and had been ritzy ever since.

"It's that girl again," she complained, holding her ear with one hand and her pink kimono together with the other. "I can't stand it. And my daughter can't do her studies."

Her daughter, Maud, a young, placid girl with a kind of pale prettiness that her mother fixed up real appealing at times, was taking a boshology course three afternoons a week. When her mother wasn't spilling French, she was dissecting complexes.

"That noise she makes is simply terrible," went on Mrs. Beamish, referring to Mrs. LaMarr's talented daughter. "Just listen to it."

Above the general musical manslaughter, came words which we assorted out as meaning:

"You used to make me blue—berry,
But now I don't give a straw—berry
For all your love, you goose—berry;
You're only a rasp—berry now."

"That's jazz," I explained.

"Whatever it is," declared my prize boarder, "it's got to stop, or Maud and I will move."

"I'll speak to her about it," I gulped.

"If you will, see voo play," she smiled, sour, and turned to coddle a pair of curlers.

II.

So things went. In the tug of war between my boarders, I was the old hemp rope.

My nerves got frayed. I tried to please everybody. But it seemed only the death, dismissal or disgrace of one would pacify the other.

Running a boarding house is like trying to juggle an egg, a soup plate, a whisk-broom and three billiard balls at once. An amateur simply can't do it.

And it was little Miss Frankie that was the odd piece. What to do with her?

I couldn't pack her off, young and tender and trusting as she was. I couldn't take her money or they'd take the piano and she'd never be famous. I couldn't write her folks back home to send for her, or her heart would break.

But I couldn't let her stay on, eating three square meals a day out of my pocket and scaring away the paying guests with her African syncopation, could I?

As Sir Conan Doyle would say—there must be some happy medium.

At last I struck it. I would invite my young, rich and idle nephew, Stanley McGuire, to visit me, instigate a romance, marry the children off to each other, collect her back rent from him—and hit the trail of my dreams again. It was as simple as a movie ingenoo.

Stanley accepted the invite all right. His folks had tooted to Florida for a month, taking the cook with them, and he was willing enough to listen to the lure of lemon pie that I held out to him.

At the table that night, I maneuvered to have him parked next to my little songbird. She was looking real chipper, all in yellow like a canary, and Stanley noticed it. In fact, they took to each other right away.

Things *was* going to be simple!

But I pulled one boner. Maud Beamish and her ma installed themselves right across the table. Having noticed my nephew's new blue roadster outside, they took it on themselves to be real agreeable.

Maud looked like an overblown rose in pink, placidly alluring, and Ma Beamish was rampant in purple.

"Of course, you've been across, Mr. McGuire," she smiled, forcing Stanley's gaze from little Miss Frankie, at whom he'd been looking since the bean soup.

"Why, yes," he answered, politely.

"I've so regretted that I've never been able to take my daughter with me on any of my trips," she went on, corraling his attention, ruthless.

Stanley smiled vague at Maud and turned to give a real teeth revealer to Miss Frankie. But the look that she tossed back wasn't as friendly as before, and she edged away to talk with little Miss Meeker, the school mar'm, that was mincing her hash.

"I'll never forget the Rue de la Pax," continued Mrs. Beamish, with a chummy air that excluded the rest of the table. "Don't you love it in the spring, Mr. McGuire? I did so want Maud to see it—

And the Arc de Triumph, of course, far surpasses Grant's Tomb, don't you think? Maud hasn't even seen much of New York. It's *so* impossible getting around in the subways and busses, and we have no car just now."

"If you like—" began my poor nephew, completely and hopelessly entangled.

"Oh, you're so kind!" she took him up quicker'n a hungry Eskimo does raw fish. "*I* wouldn't go, but it might do Maudie good to get out for a little spin. The dear, uncomplaining child's been studying so hard lately. The inferiority complex has quite fagged her, don't you know."

Say, it was a miracle to me the way that woman made dates. Inside five minutes, she would have had the Prince of Wales hooked up for a morning canter with her Maud. It was amazing.

"Won't you come, too, Miss LaMarr?" begged poor Stanley, as much with his eyes as with his voice.

"Two's company and three's a chaperon," she refused, airy, and went up to her room, whence emerged the chorus of "You're Only a Raspberry Now."

Ma Beamish supervised the installing of Maud and Stanley in the chummy roadster and hied to her suite, satisfied. On the way up, she give me a friendly, almost understanding smile. She didn't know before that I had a rich, idle and unattached nephew.

I retired to the kitchen, hopeless and defeated. Good-by, back rent and springtime on the trail!

III.

Tempus fidgeted, and so did all of us. The only ones that seemed to be enjoying things was Maudie and her maneuvering ma. They annexed poor Stanley for a regular Green Line guide and had him tote 'em all over the city, so they could admire the sights and he, Maudie.

Miss Frankie became as mopey as a caged polar bear in August, confining herself to her attic hovel, deluging our unheeding ears with an assortment of sounds like the absent-minded trickle of sea water in a cavern.

After a week I felt—oh, what's the use? My pretty romance was being busted like a Dakota bronc.

In keeping Stanley on, I was merely being an accessory to the high and mighty ambitions of Caroline Beamish, whose motto was to "woo or die," and my boarding house was ceasing to be a business proposition.

Therefore, and accordingly, Frankie must go. Stanley, too, must be on his way, back to be the idle one of his family once more. I was fed up on feeding him. As Cupid's right hand man, I only got left. After this, I'd look out for number one.

Hence, one fair morning, I girded my tender loins for the fray, hardened my heart, set my jaw resolute, and started up the front stairs on my way to eject my unpaying guest, Miss Frankie LaMarr. I would evict her as ruthless as any New York landlord, and demand as security her title to the jazz song, when published.

Strains from her baby grand wafted to me as I climbed. Strange strains, they was, as different from her usual dinning discords as a babbling brook is from Niagara. I couldn't understand it noways.

At the first landing, I encountered a thin figure, standing with ears ajar—Miss Meeker, the little old school mar'm. One hand clung to the banister and the other fluttered at the lace jabot on her skinny front. On her thin, listening map flickered a gentle smile of approval and sympathy.

She didn't seem startled at seeing me, as she usually was with folks, and even began speaking without being first spoke to.

"Hear that, Mr. McGuire?" she whispered, rapt. "Now, isn't that sweet?"

"If that's jazz," I remarked, "my grandmother was an Eskimo."

"It isn't jazz. It's a—love song. The dear child's composing it right from her heart."

"Her style sure has changed," I admitted. "I can't fathom it noways."

"I can," stated Miss Meeker, quiet. "She's in love. It's taming her."

It sure was. In place of the cruel and cutting canto, "You're only a raspberry now," come the sweetly sung sonnet, "I love thee; I love thee; I love thee all the time."

"Ain't that touching?" I breathed, something gripping me like the soft arms of an octopus. I realized it was sentiment.

Miss Meeker smiled, and her little old wizened face lighted with a glow I'd never seen there before.

"Look," she said, hushed. "Look there."

At a door, opening on the landing above, stood the listening figure of my nephew, and on his face, also, was a look I had never seen before—a far-away expression, a despairing one—the look of a man in love. His attentive ears were bent to the sounds that wafted themselves from the lips and hand of our little songbird.

The soft arms of sentiment tightened around my heart.

"Ain't that pathetic?" I confided to Miss Meeker. "The way them two adventuring felines keeps him separated from his love. All he can see of her is what he hears. Well, the course of true love never did run smooth, I guess."

"The only thing that's wrong with them," stated Miss Meeker, surprisingly vehement, "is—interference."

"You're darned right, ma'am," I agreed, hot. "And something's got to be done. If them two young hearts is truly loving of one another, I intend to elect myself a ways and means committee to see that they can beat as one."

"If I can help—" offered Miss Meeker, timid but eager.

"You can," I declared. "This job needs a woman's touch. In dealing with the widow and her might, only another female of the species will prove adequate. Tell me what to do, ma'am."

Miss Meeker deliberated. Then she announced, determined: "There's only one way, Mr. McGuire. Mrs. Beamish and her daughter must go."

I sighed, remembering my Aggie's last words. "Be nice to Mrs. Beamish," she had cautioned. "She pays for the whole house with that big front suite. Don't let *her* go, whatever you do."

In letting Mrs. Beamish go I would be killing the goose that laid the greenback. Oh, what price Frankie's back rent?

But there was a factor other than money: the eternal, all-important factor of love. If those two kids liked each other, it was up to me to smooth the way of romance and give them the right to argue over the breakfast table for the rest of their lives.

Springtime on the trail at fifty! What was that compared to young love at twenty? All right, then, I'd elect myself love's champion—at any cost.

"Mrs. Beamish *will* go," I announced, firm. "I'll tell her to-night."

"Oh, no!" protested Miss Meeker, horrified. "You can't do that. Mrs. Beamish would have the law on you for breaking the lease."

"Stampeding steers!" I breathed.

"But there's another way," she went on, wise. "You can make her *want* to go."

"She'll never want to go," I despaired, "not so long as my dear, rich and unattached nephew remains."

"Yet she might," persisted Miss Meeker. "Especially if things got—unpleasant."

She eyed me steady for a minute and almost winked.

"I get you," I laughed. "To-night, for instance, Madam Beamish, de la Paris and all points Continental, ain't going to rest none too easy."

"Why not?" asked Miss Meeker, innocent.

"Rice, 'twixt sheet and mattress."

"The Princess and the Pea, I see," she smiled. "Just like Grimm."

"It 'll be mighty grim all right for the widow," I promised darkly. "And if *that* don't work—"

Miss Meeker gasped, trying to appear horror-struck, but I could see that she was not.

I meandered to the kitchen, marveling on the miracle of love that had changed Frankie from flapper to forlorn Flora, and little old Miss Meeker from fossil to real folks.

All would yet be well. The Widow Beamish would go, the kids would marry, and, as a dénouement, I would collect Frankie's back rent—which, after all, was the whole purport and purpose of the plot.

In the kitchen I discovered my dear nephew in the act of looting the ice box,

while Katie, the cook, kept an anxious eye on him from the pantry.

"Uncle William," began Stanley, without warning, "I might as well tell you I'm going home to-night. The folks are back, you know."

I gulped. This was unexpected.

"Well, that don't compel you to cease visiting the relatives that love you, does it?" I asked, pitiful.

He shifted to his other sport Oxford.

"No," he admitted. "But I just think I ought to go. Things around here are kind of—well—"

"Out with the main excuse, boy," I encouraged.

"Well, unk," he continued—and I could see he was makeshifting—"it just seems as though I can't get enough to eat here, except prunes and hash, and the mater wants me to come home."

"You don't like the groceries, huh?" I observed, sober. "What *would* you want in the way of a menu?"

"Oh," he returned, indefinite, "I don't know. Things like we have home—lobsters and waffles and such—and popovers every morning—and some kind of a nice little hord'œuvre at dinner. I can't leap right into veal cutlets."

"You're a spoiled child, Stanley," I lamented; "but we'll see what we can do. In the meantime, you plan on staying at least another week. We all like you, kid."

"No, not *all* of you," he gloomed; and I knew he was thinking of the little songbird.

"Yep, all of us, Stan," I insisted. "Now, are you promising us you won't pack up your toothbrush and lavender pyjamas and leave us French like?"

"I'll stay," he agreed, thoughtful, "for a couple of days anyhow. Thanks, unk," and he strolled listless out into the hall, where I heard him being swooped upon by the widow and her daughter.

"Katie!" I called, summoning the cook from the pantry, whence she ambled like a soft-soled camel. "We're going to have lobster and waffles to-night, with some kind of a dainty chef d'oof for appetizer. My nephew don't like to plunge right into the main course without a gentle start."

"An' what are ye m'anin' by that woid—that chef d'oof?" she inquired, belligerent.

"It's French," I explained.

"Well, Oi'm Irish," she returned, as if that settled it.

"We'll leave that out, then," I compromised, "and just have the lobster and waffles."

"Lobster!" she hooted. "I'd sooner trifle with th' divil himself. Dissectin' one o' thim things is a major operation, sor, an' Oi ain't no surjin."

"Nevertheless, we'll have lobster," I insisted, terrified lest Stanley should leave us for Newburg.

Katie placed her hands on her hips.

"Well, thin, ye don't have *me*," she declared, final. "They ain't room enough in this kitchen fer me an' one o' thim watchdogs o' Hades. Oi'm a plain Irish cook, an' so I'll remain. Next thing ye'll be wantin' truffles an' artichokes."

"In all probability," I sighed.

"I'm goin'," she said, and went.

IV.

THE next afternoon I was the poor but proud possessor of a magnificent French chef, as skinny as a starved pinto—worth only half Katie's weight in golden bantam, but charging twice that much. Stanley seemed satisfied, however, and said he'd stay.

The rest of the guests, also, was pleased with the ritzy menu that would have made the Bilkedmore seem like a wagon lunch.

Caroline Beamish and her Maud stayed on. They stayed in the face of purposely frozen radiators, no towels, uncertain hot water, and sand in their salad. Grim and determined, they held the first line trenches against the enemy. An ambitious woman is a deadly thing.

I called another conference with little Miss Meeker on the stairs.

"Ma'am," I commenced in a despairing whisper, "she won't go."

"No," snorted Miss Meeker, her eyes almost ferocious. "She's on the warpath now and determined to endure the discomforts of war."

"She's worse than an old adhesive," I complained, "sticking to a sore spot after it ain't needed."

"Yes," sniffed Miss Meeker. "And there's only one way now to make her go. Get *her* on a sore spot."

"Has she any?"

"She has. I'm sure of it. It's her French. If that should be questioned, she would be so mortified she would have to go."

"Is there anything wrong with it—her French?" I inquired, hopeful.

"I'm not certain, but I think so. That is not one of the subjects I teach, but I think I know just enough about it to be skeptical about some of her pronunciation. I've brought a small French dictionary from school this afternoon and we can ascertain."

"Let me at it!" I exulted.

"It's in my room," she hesitated. "If you'll just come to the door—"

I went, grabbing the book, greedy, and parking against the sill, while she looked over my shoulder.

"Yep," I whispered, triumphant. "Here are a couple of her pet expressions right here. *Faux pas,* for instance. And she *don't* pronounce 'em just right. Bounding buffaloes, wait till the next time she pulls one!"

Miss Meeker smiled so chummy and confiding I could have hugged her.

"You're a wonder, ma'am," I complimented, and fled from her bright blush.

V.

DINNER that night started well with anchovy toast, a purée de printemps, filet de mignon, salade de macedoine and a méringue glacé. Every course was a complete surprise to the boarders, a couple of traveling salesmen making bets as to the meaning of the words.

Caroline Beamish was spokeswoman for the party, interpreting the menu to them that ate in darkness with a condescension that would have humbled a duchess.

"We used to have these same filets at the little Cabaret de Beaux Arts," she explained, smiling affable. "Maud doesn't remember, not being on that trip with me, but perhaps *you* recall that dear little place, Stanley?"

"I don't think so," he gulped, trying to soften Frankie's hard hearted stare.

"Oh, but you must!" she chortled. "Any one who's been to Paris without stopping there commits a terrible *fox pass.*"

I almost swallowed a whole méringue in my triumph.

"There you're wrong, ma'am!" I announced, cracking the flat of my hand on the table top with a snap that made the boarders stare. It ain't *fox pass.* No, sir! You're completely loco. It's *faux pas.*"

"What!" she shrieked, taken aback, then recovered her customary cool poise. "I didn't know *you* were a French student," she added, withering me with a look.

"I'm not. But I savvy enough to recognize them that also ain't."

"What do you mean by that?" she asked, cold and steely.

"Draw your own contusions, ma'am," I smiled, mockingly humble.

The table tittered.

The widow crumpled her napkin.

"Maud," she breathed, tense, "come, please," and rose from the table like Venus from the sea.

She left the next morning before breakfast, neglecting to pay the back rent. It was peace—at a great price.

Two days later, Frankie and my dear nephew emerged from the park with the announcement that they was an engaged couple. I sighed with relief, pressing Miss Meeker's little skinny hand in a glow of comradeship.

"Sick semper aristocrats," I triumphed. "Exit the ambitious ma to pastures new and fertile, dragging her Maudie behind her. Enter the happy pair. Ain't love grand, ma'am?"

"Yes," said she, blushing.

VI.

I GAVE the bride away, using my best parlors for the purpose, and the chef served the wedding guests a real nice little light lunch for the extra consideration of two hundred joy jujubes.

We sped the bridal pair, shy and happy, on their honeymoon, my lips remaining sealed about the wife's past—rent. There was time to talk of that when they come back, ready for the drab realities of life and living.

With a glow of satisfaction and duty well done, I climbed the stairs to my attic hovel. It was a long time since I'd had the chance to sit and view them postcards of the trail.

On the way up the stairs a skinny figure inserted itself in my dream and a wistful face loomed white before me. It was little Miss Meeker, coming down and toting a black bag.

"Mr. McGuire," she commenced, flurried, "I want to settle about the rent now. I—I'm going to-day."

"Going?" I repeated in wonderment. "Why, ma'am?"

Her lip fluttered like a little sparrow taking a dirt bath. "It's not that I *want* to," she said, finally.

"Then what's the grand idea?" I inquired, a queer feeling gripping me.

"It's—Oh, I just can't tell you," she blurted, near crying.

"Go on, ma'am," I urged, gentle.

"It's just," she hesitated, sucking her lip under to steady it, "just that they're—talking."

"Who's talking?"

"Folks in this house."

"Well, what are they talking about? Tell me, ma'am."

She looked away, answering low and tremulous, "You and—me."

"Huh! And what are they saying?"

"Oh, nothing—except that they hint—about us—talking secret on the stairs. They say we have a—understanding."

"Which is more than some dumb people," I muttered, hot.

"So I've got to go," she concluded, sorrowful.

Pity and something else that was warm swept over me.

"You *ain't* going to go, ma'am," I told her, firm. "You're going to stay just as long as you want."

"But they'll keep on talking about me," she protested, mournful.

"Well," said I, reckless and sudden, "I guess they wouldn't talk about Mrs. William O. McGuire, would they, huh?"

Wonderment come over them lean and lemony features, making them rosy.

"Oh!" she said. "Oh-h."

"I guess the young folks ain't got basic patents on this here romance business, have they?" I asked, cocky, as we sat, holding hands, after a couple minutes of silence.

"No," she breathed. "Oh, no. And oh, Mr. McGuire, can I—we—have that big front suite of Mrs. Beamish's?"

"Sure, you can have it!" I grinned, inwardly groaning. My best paying suite!

VII.

And so I took a second wife to comfort me in my old age. Stanley and my new niece sailed in just after we was married.

No sooner was the greetings over when my bright young nephew said affectionate, one hand upon my shoulder, chummy-like, and the other around his bride's waist, "Unk, we've decided something."

"What?" I asked, hopeful. Now for Frankie's back rent.

"We've decided we'll stay here, if you want us. You're getting old, unk, and lonely, and all—" He didn't know yet about Miss Meeker—"and we think that some of your own folks ought to be with you. Besides Frankie doesn't want to set up housekeeping yet. She's going to finish that song."

"Oh," I intoned.

"So we'll just park here awhile, if you want us," he continued, cheery. "But, unk," he added, lower, "I ought to tell you it'll be pretty hard sledding for me at first. I'm going to work. Frankie's making me. Said she won't touch a cent of my dad's filthy lucre. So I'm afraid we can't pay you much rent at the start."

"That's all right," I smiled, wan. "It's worth a million, kid, having your own folks around you."

That's what I told 'em.

But sometimes I wonder, in the springtime, how the breakfast bacon'd taste out on the trail.

THE END

Willie off the Pickle Boat

By GORDON STILES

IF you are one of those people who know all about the city at Cranston, Maine, and Lake Wannebunk, forty miles from there, up in the mountains, you will not be much interested in the first part of this story. So, anybody who lives in Sawgrass County can skip the first page or two without losing anything of vital importance.

But for the benefit of those who are not familiar with the conditions which have obtained in these two places for many years, I will give a rough outline of the way matters stood before the events which I shall record took place.

Of course, most people who are posted on business will associate Cranston with the manufacture of clothespins, washboards, belt buckles, and pearl buttons. I cannot give the figures offhand, but my father has has told me that we lead the world in the production of the above-named commodities.

However that may be, Cranston is a mighty fine city, and can boast a more solid prosperity than many larger places.

If it had not been for father and a few other Cranston business men, Lake Wannebunk would never have amounted to anything. It was a fine sheet of water, eighteen miles long, and from two to six miles wide, but there was no way of getting to the place; that is, until these men decided to do something about it.

Anson J. Betts, my father—he's the president of the Pine Tree Washboard Company—owned a great deal of land around the lake. So did Horace Kenny, Archibald King, and William Hobart. They got together and decided to build a road fit for motors, and put up houses out at the lake which could be used for summer occupancy.

They took a few other men in with them, and the idea was to establish a sort of col-

ony, where they could take their families for two or three months each year and feel that the surroundings would be proper.

Of course, all this was a long time ago, when I was quite young, but I realize now what foresight those men had. Even in Cranston, which was settled and developed by old American stock, an undesirable element has crept in—foreigners and families of foreigners who have not been in this country more than two or three generations, you know—and people of real family have to watch out pretty closely.

Well, all of the men I mentioned built cottages out at Lake Wannebunk, and when I was a kid we began going there the first part of June and staying until time for school to open. We had some pretty dog-goned good times, too.

There were, besides me, Tom Hobart, Fred and Mart King and their two sisters, Dorothy and Elise; the four Kenny children, Edith, Norma, Beatrice, and Arthur. Oh, I forgot to mention my own sister, Kathleen.

Anyhow, you can get that, growing up together in Cranston and going out to the lake every summer, we all got to know each other pretty well, and when certain families are what you might call important in a place, it is only natural that the sons and daughters of those families should try to maintain the dignity and prestige that is in their keeping.

Therefore, after all of us had finished our local schooling and gone off to college, we were mighty careful about who crashed into our parties out at the lake, I can tell you.

To begin with, a fellow owes something to his sister. Anybody will agree to that. It is up to him to see that no bounders or people who have not been bred decently spoil things by shoe-horning themselves into places and affairs where they have no right to be. There's altogether too much of that sort of thing nowadays.

As a matter of fact, I fear that my father and his associates were more or less responsible for what happened last summer. You see, after they had finished building, and had laid out their grounds around the lake, there was quite a bit of land left, down at one end. It was sort of swampy, and the lake was shallow, with a muddy bottom in that part.

Seeing it was of no special use to them, they made the mistake of selling the acreage to a man named Murphy, from Boston. He claimed he could cut the trees off and make a fair profit, so they let him have it in a lump.

I've often told father how I felt about that deal, and pointed out to him that he was not entirely blameless as to the results.

Murphy cut off some of the trees, not all of them, and then went to work and built two big docks. He had the water front dredged, and threw out a couple of breakwaters.

And the first thing we knew, the land he had bought was cut up into building lots. He had the nerve to advertise in the Boston papers, as well as those in Portland and Bangor. Advertised the place as

SUNSET PARK ESTATES
ON DELIGHTFUL LAKE WANNEBUNK

The Most Exclusive Inland Resort in the State of Maine. The Spot Chosen by the First Families as Their Summer Playground

Can you imagine a thing like that?

Naturally, father was as mad as the devil; so were all of our friends. But there was nothing to be done about it, even when the most impossible people began to come in and build equally impossible shacks. No particular style of architecture, and facing any old way. Cheap as could be, some of them, too. And all that we could do was to see that the rabble kept in its proper place.

II.

WITHIN two years you wouldn't have known Lake Wannebunk. Murphy's so-called Sunset Park Estates had been snapped up almost entirely, and the lower part of the lake shore looked like a young city.

The people who built there were pretty awful themselves, and, to make it worse, their friends came in swarms for the week-ends during the summer. The road leading to Cranston was choked with rattling old flivvers full of men with their coats off

and handkerchiefs tucked into their collars, and crazy-looking women, to say nothing of the frowzy kids they stowed away in among their legs.

If they had kept to their own part of the lake it wouldn't have been so bad. But they were all over the place—driving up and down the roads in front of our cottages, nosing their canoes along close up to our waterfront, playing ukuleles and banjos half the night out on the water.

More than once, when we started out for a smart party, such as a picnic lunch on Otter Island—when we had college friends up and wanted to put on a decent show for them—these people would get their canoes and kickers mixed right in with ours, so that anybody looking on would think they were actually part of our crowd.

You can readily understand how we all felt about it. I talked so much to father on the subject that he finally told me to shut up; he didn't want to hear any more about the matter. No doubt he felt sensitive, and perhaps a bit ashamed of his part in bringing it about.

Still, we managed to carry on after a fashion—herding by ourselves and dodging the mob. And in time we might have worked out a satisfactory system if it had not been for the "Pickle Boat."

You see, with all those people about the lake, there was a great demand for fresh supplies, and a chap named Seastrom fitted out a sixty foot boat with ice boxes and so forth and began to run about the lake with vegetables and meat, and milk and groceries.

He carried a line of delicatessen, and pretty soon everybody began to call the Catfish—that was her real name—the pickle boat.

Before the end of that season—that was summer before last—Seastrom had worked up quite a trade, I understand. My folks and the other families along our part of the shore had been in the habit of bringing all of our supplies out from Cranston. But Seastrom sold good stuff, even if he did charge more, and it came about that practically everybody bought from him. His expenses were not heavy; he had only one helper, and he made a lot of money.

My father said that Seastrom was a wise bird, and that somebody ought to have thought of the stunt sooner. He even asked me why I had not thought of it. Jokingly, of course. I finished college that year.

On the whole, the pickle boat, in itself, was a good thing. It was Seastrom's helper, the second season, that caused all the trouble.

When the boat started on her rounds that year the helper's name was Olsen, but he went off on a bat before the end of the first week, and after Seastrom had struggled on alone for a few days he hooked on to a new man—a young fellow, maybe twenty-two or twenty-three—about a year or so older than I. His name was William Spicer, and he came from the Lord knows where.

This lad was a weird thing to scan. I think it was Tom Hobart who said that Spicer's coloring clashed violently with the peaceful green of the background against which he worked.

Anyway, it was Tom who named him "Willie off the Pickle Boat." And everybody took it up at once, of course. Tom is clever as the devil; everybody says he ought to write.

To get back on the rails—Willie's hair was as red as fire and his complexion sort of freckly blobs. You've seen 'em. His nose turned up a little at the end, giving him a sort of fresh appearance.

He was a good worker, though, people said. Willing sort of chap and all that. And I am forced to admit that, after the first few times I noticed him, I myself thought him pretty good at his job. No doubt he would have been if he had attended to it and to nothing else.

III.

Our crowd was quite gay that summer, lots of visitors and all that, you know. Otherwise, I dare say some of the men would have noticed what was going on before they did.

But all of a sudden the girls took it into their heads to do the daily shopping for their families instead of leaving the servants

to handle it. Which was nothing to be surprised about; girls are always getting an idea that they can make themselves useful in one way or another.

What I myself began to remark was that the pickle boat stopped longer than usual at the landings where our crowd lived. Longer and longer. Yet, we did not seem to be buying any more stuff than before.

Even when Mart King and I went aboard one morning and saw Kathleen and Edith Kenny "kidding" Willie, we didn't think anything of it. I did speak to my sister about it; told her she ought not to make free with persons of that sort. But she bristled—as sisters are fond of doing—and said that she could amuse herself without any advice from me.

One day a lot of the girls were over at our place and just as Tom, Arthur Kenny and I strolled up to where they were sitting on the porch there was a loud outburst of laughter.

Tom inquired: "Why all the ribald mirth?"

And Beatrice Kenny told him: "We were laughing at something Mr. Spicer told Dorothy this morning."

I said: "Mr. Spicer? Who on earth is Mr. Spicer?"

"Why," said Beatrice, "Mr. Spicer, who works on the supply boat."

"Oh," said I, "you mean Willie—Willie off the Pickle Boat."

"The same," put in Edith. Then she looked at me for a minute and added: "A very interesting chap he is, too."

I did not like that. You see, things had got to the point with me where I was sort of putting Edith in a class by herself, in my own mind. I won't go so far as to say that I was in love with the girl. A man of twenty-one is apt to watch his step these days.

But I had decided that Edith was more worth while than any of the others, and I was quietly analyzing her various traits as a fellow is bound to do when he gives a frill more than a passing thought.

So when she came out with that it gave me a bit of a jolt. Then it occurred to me that she had said it in a joke, and I laughed. "Ha, ha!" said I. "That's a good one!"

At that moment Kathleen made matters worse by saying: "He's an awfully nice chap. I've a notion to invite him to my dance next week."

That was too much. I said: "You what?"

"You heard me," my sister replied. "Why do you act so stupid, Marvin? Why shouldn't I ask anybody I choose to my dance?"

That nettled me, because she ought to have known why without asking. But I kept my temper and merely said: "Of course if you're so dumb that you can't see why you should not bring a cheap grocery clerk or deckhand or whatever this fellow is, into your home I don't see that it would be any use trying to explain. You're only fooling, anyhow."

"You'll see if I am fooling or not," she said.

Just the same I was knocked for a row of coconut trees when she told me, a couple of days later, that Willie was coming if he could dig up a dress suit.

IV.

THE less said about that dance the better. The Willie person came and the girls made the silliest sort of a fuss over him. His red head showed up in the crowd like a lighthouse on a hill, and while the men were civil to him, they gave him pretty well to understand that he was damned lucky to be where he was. In a subtle way, of course.

He was a silly sort of chap—laughing all the time, and he did not seem to notice that he was being politely snubbed. Too thick-skinned, I suppose. But he could dance pretty well, which seems to be all a man needs to get along with the girls.

You could see how hard he was trying not to make a break when he talked. Too precise, if you know what I mean. He would stop and pick his words before he made a remark, which I admit was a relief because I had been afraid he would drop a few cuss words without thinking. He had the gall of the devil, too.

I asked him where he hailed from, and he said: "All over. I was a steward on

the Mauretania before I connected with this job."

"Do you care for your position here?" I asked.

He answered: "Not bad. Not so much money in it, but it's easy, and you don't have to wait on a lot of fat, seasick women."

I moved away then. My mother is fat, and she had crossed on the Mauretania once or twice, and she is always seasick. It was only a short time later when I began to get good and sore.

Three times in succession I saw the pickle-boat sheik dancing with Edith, and one of the dances was mine. I tried to cut in, but Edith waved me off.

So I went out where the punch was and told Tom Hobart that something ought to be done about it. Tom said:

"The best thing to do is nothing. Let it run its course. You know how girls get a kick out of amusing themselves with a new man, even if he's nothing more than a ditch digger. If he takes it seriously, it's his own fault and the penalty for being the sort of person he is."

I helped myself to punch and remarked: "Perhaps you are right."

But three nights later when I drifted over to see Edith, who should I find, right there on the porch, bold as life, but Willie? Which was bad enough in itself without all the rest.

It seems that Willie was trying to make something of himself, as Edith put it to me afterward in a rather stormy session we had, and he had been reading Boswell's "Life of Johnson." He admitted straight out that he was doing it to improve his mind. And it so happened that Edith had read the book through twice. I hadn't. So I had to sit there for almost two hours twiddling my fingers while they prattled about the thing.

No matter how often I tried to switch on them, they got back to it, and finally I felt that Edith was imposing on me. I got up and said: "I think I'll be off. I've got some thrilling chapters in Kant's 'Critique of Pure Reason' that I want to read before bedtime." With that I walked away.

Edith called after me, "'Ware the old brain-fag, Marvin." Which did not help any.

V.

After that the other fellows saw as I did—that something ought to happen which would put this upstart in his place. Matters went from bad to worse. Willie butted in everywhere with his red hair and freckles—to say nothing of that imbecilic grin of his. And the season had a full month to go yet.

If he had not singled out Edith Kenny for his attentions, we might have worried on until the fall and let it go at that. But it got so that he was running up there two or three times a week—once, four times. And then our bunch held a council of war.

I was for going to Seastrom and putting it up to him that he must get rid of Willie or lose our trade; and if that didn't work, we could offer him a decent sum of money to fire his helper. We were considering that when Tom Hobart crashed in with the real scheme.

He pointed out that the fellow might park himself somewhere around the lake, even if he did lose his job. He had nerve enough for anything. No. Something ought to be pulled that would get under his skin and humiliate him in the eyes of the girls. So we worked it out then and there.

On the next Thursday night we put our plan into effect. Willie used the footpath through the side grounds of the Kenny place, and at one point the trail leads past a high rock so that there is a blind spot there. And well before the time came for Willie to show up, our bunch concealed themselves at that spot.

We had cut holes in pillow cases and put them over our heads just as a simple precaution. We didn't worry about getting into trouble, because our families' influence would pull us out of any scrape we might find ourselves in as a result of our scheme. Also, we agreed not to speak during the whole proceeding.

Willie came sauntering along about nine o'clock. That was as early as he could get

away. We let him get a few feet past where we were hidden and then rushed him.

He didn't have a chance; there were five of us. All he said when we grabbed his arms was: "What the hell!"

Each one of us had been assigned his particular part, and a few minutes later Willie was wound about with so many strands of clothesline that he looked like a big cocoon. His arms were tight to his sides and his legs fast together.

We stuffed cotton into his mouth and tied a towel over to keep it in place. Then we picked him up on our shoulders and started on toward Edith's.

Fred King, who had gone ahead to spy out the conditions, reported that the side porch was dark, and that he could see Edith reading in the little reception room inside the door.

That was fine! We knew she would answer Willie's ring herself.

When we got Willie down to the edge of the trees, only a few feet from the steps, we fastened on his chest a placard which read:

HERE HE IS!

Then we toted him very quietly up on the porch and stood him up against the door. Everybody sneaked back into the shrubbery except Mart King, who was to ring the bell and run.

We watched breathlessly as Mart pressed the button and bounded off the steps. We knew Edith would not hurry. They never do—just to make a man think they are not as anxious as he is, I suppose.

Well, Mart had plenty of time to join us before the door swung open.

It was hard to keep from letting out a yell when that happened. Willie fell inward like a plank, and—what we had not counted on—plumped into Edith. She squealed, and they went down in a heap. We knew she couldn't be hurt, so nudged each other and smothered our laughter out there in the dark, and waited to see what would happen.

Edith picked herself up, staring at Willie. Then she ran to the porch and peered about with her hand over her eyes. She went in again; we saw her read the message. Then she dragged Willie in by the heels and shut the door.

We got away as fast as possible and roared over the incident. Even if you were not there, you can appreciate how funny it was.

VI.

After that, of course, any regular chap would have taken a sneak out of town. We certainly expected that Willie would. Naturally, we could not appear too interested in him, so we did not go *en masse* to see if he showed up next day. We just managed to drop down to the various landings, one at a time, you see; and I'll be doggoned if he wasn't on the job, just as bold and fresh as ever!

We decided to mix up with the girls to see if they had heard anything about last night's business, but they were all over at Edith's and up in her room, so we went for a swim and separated about lunch time.

Kathleen was late, and the minute she came in I could see that she was bubbling over with excitement. Now, I thought, we shall hear all about it. I didn't say anything, though.

"What do you think?" Kathleen began, addressing the table.

"I'll bite," I said in a slightly bored tone.

"Edith," she said impressively, "is going to marry Mr. Spicer!"

At that moment I choked on a fish bone —we had fish for lunch—and when I could talk I asked:

"Is she crazy?"

"Some of us accused her of being so," Kathleen said soberly. "But she insists that she is perfectly sane. She's going to tell her people to-night. Anyhow she's madly in love with him, and says she is certain that he will make his way. Maybe she is right."

And on her face was that foolish look girls get when anybody they know is going to get married.

I controlled my feelings and remarked: "I fancy Edith's folks will spike that arrangement in a hurry."

"Not if I know Edith," she said.

"It's only a whim," I told her.

"That may be," my sister said, "but Edith has a whim of iron!"

I got up and went outside.

VII.

For two or three days after that I was pretty desperate. Not that I cared a damn what a hare-brained girl like Edith Kenny did with her life. But it was humiliating to think that I had given her serious consideration at one time.

So, naturally, I was ready for anything when I got the note from Dodo Flynn.

You see, while we had plenty of doings among our own crowd, a man has to get about a little and see something of life outside his own circle. That was how I came to meet Dodo.

The Murphy outfit had built a big dancing pavilion on the shore about two miles below the end of our land. They put it well away from the docks so they could charge a quarter for ferrying people up there, and it turned out to be a pretty lively place.

Good floor, good music, and a little bootleg on the side. You know.

It is not surprising that our bunch drifted over there now and again, and of course we never mentioned it to our families.

I think they suspected something, however, because once my father said to me: "If you must have a drink, you'd better take along a flask of decent stuff from home. I wouldn't trifle with Murphy's rot-gut!"

However, down at Murphy's we had run across several rather nice kids. Not really our sort, you know, but full of fun and good dancers.

Perfectly straight, you understand, and all that. Just a bunch of jolly girls out for a lark. And we had a lot of good times with them.

Of them all, I preferred Dodo Flynn. She was a cute little trick and we used to pair off a lot.

Well, as I said, I was primed for trouble when I received Dodo's note. It came about a week after the affair at Edith's, and I had got down to earth again, more or less. Dodo wrote:

> Dearest Marvin.
>
> I hope you won't mind my writing to you. But I must see you to-morrow night about something important. Can you meet me at the sugar house at seven thirty, sharp? I'll tell you all about it then. Don't let a single soul know that you are coming. It would spoil everything!
>
> Love from
>
> Dodo Baby.

Well, I thought, that's funny. I wonder what she wants? Spoil everything! Spoil what, I wonder? Oh, well, I thought, I'll go. The more I see of women, the less I understand them. Queer creatures!

VIII.

The sugar house, a log shack built some years before and now in disuse, was about a mile this side of Murphy's Pavilion, and reached by a footpath through the woods. Dodo and I had strolled up there several times when we had been dancing, and so had most of the others in the crowd.

I started in plenty of time and came into the little cleared space around the house fully ten minutes before the time Dodo had set. I saw nothing of her, and was about to sit down on a log when I heard a noise inside the shack.

The next minute Willie off the Pickle Boat had stepped out!

I was so surprised that I stared at him like a dumb-bell, I guess. He did not seem astonished, however.

He came forward grinning, and said three words: "Put 'em up!"

In spite of my surprise, that made my blood boil. Did this—this—bounder think I would fight him? Over a girl, too!

I straightened up and said: "Do you think I would soil my hands with scum like you?"

Now, if the fellow had been decent, he would at least have explained what the row was supposed to be about. But, no! All he said was: "No, I don't think you will! Not much!"

With no other warning his fist flew out.

Taken thus at a disadvantage, I went down. Of course, I got up—tried to, at any rate. But the moment I got halfway erect, he slammed me again. Having made me groggy by that first unfair punch, he had it all his own way.

In the end, he got me down, sat upon me, and reached for some pieces of rope which he seemed to have handy. With these he tied my hands and feet and stuffed my mouth full of cotton. After which he dragged me inside the sugar house!

"There!" he said. "You're salted away." He looked at his watch. "I hope," he said, "your little playmates will be on time."

It may have been fifteen minutes later when I heard somebody coming up the path. I squirmed and wriggled. Willie gave me a kick and moved toward the door. Then he stepped outside.

I heard him say again: "Put 'em up!"

And Tom Hobart's voice came back with: "What the hell?"

After that there was an awful row outside. But presently Willie appeared, dragging Tom, tied up the same as I was. He dumped his victim alongside me and stood looking at us.

"A sweet pair to draw to," he said, and looked again at his watch.

Then I began to see what had happened. The sneaking Willie had written those notes, signed a girl's name to each one of them in order to get us where he could take us unawares! Of course he was riding for a fall.

Assault, forgery—maybe other charges! We'd show him!

Fred and Mart and Arthur came in order. Willie, with his unfair tactics, managed to knock them all out. So that, less than two hours after I had showed up, the five of us were all there together in the sugar house.

We couldn't talk for the gags—but I know all of us were wondering what Willie would do next. I wouldn't put anything past a bird like him!

He hadn't stopped grinning once, but now he did.

"I'm going out for a short time," he said sternly. "I trust you *gentlemen* vill remain quiet while I'm gone."

He disappeared through the door, and we heard him walking away.

That was the signal for a great effort to break loose. We writhed and twisted, but the chap had done a good job. Thirty minutes or so passed, and none of us had got free.

Then we heard a motor stop in the road at the end of the little path, and kept quiet, waiting for what was to come.

A lot of people were coming toward the hut, and as they came within earshot we knew at once who they were. The girls were squealing in the silly way they always do over a mystery:

"What on earth, Willie?"

"Are you crazy, Willie?"

"I thought you were going to show us something funny, Willie."

The last was in Edith's voice, and I gritted my teeth.

Outside the door Willie halted the parade for a second. The light from an electric torch played about the entrance as he said: "I told you that I would show you something funny. I will. I call them my collection of pet skunks!"

With that he flashed the torch about inside and the girls crowded into the doorway.

It's no use going over the events of the next few minutes. Willie made a few remarks at our expense; we could not even talk. Of course he carefully avoided any reference to his methods of fighting. But in the end he took out a pocketknife and cut the rope on my hands.

"You do it, George," he said. "Come on, people."

With which he walked away with all the girls.

Willie and Edith were married, right enough. And when it came out that he was the harum-scarum son of William Otis Spicer, the big New York banker, it became necessary for us to tolerate him at least outwardly. But I am sure that our bunch and Willie will never be fast friends.

THE END

THE READER'S VIEWPOINT

LETTERS are coming in so fast that the editor must ask his readers' patience in the matter of their appearance. He is delighted to have his public feel that in ARGOSY they are getting, in these days of specializing, a magazine that specializes in stories of all kinds. To help broaden its scope in this respect he has arranged for some wonderful tales of the Great War. The first of these, a novelette by Gordon Stiles, will appear early next month under the title, "Espionage"—a vivid narrative of an American's adventures in 1916 during the London air raids.

In reply to H. J., "Without Gloves" was written by James B. Hendryx, and "Poker Faces," by Edgar Franklin, ran from August 18 to September 23, 1923.

STEUBENVILLE, OHIO

Please don't change your style. To me you are the best in the land as is. If you must run more Western stories, O. K. I don't have to read them; I know I'll get my money's worth anyway. Liked "Moonglow" right much, sir. Only wish it had been a little longer. Can't seem to enthuse over "Don Rando'," though; of course, it's young yet. May get more interesting later.

Saw "Poker Faces" at the movies last night. Great stuff! It's been a couple of years since that ran in ARGOSY, hasn't it? Would like a sequel to "Unbeatable Bates." He was some little fixer. I'd like very much to know who wrote "Without Gloves." I'll never forget that story. H. J.

BROOKLYN, N. Y.

You have asked for the opinion of the readers as to the continuance or discontinuance of Western stories in the ARGOSY. Here is my opinion:

The name of your magazine is the ARGOSY-ALL-STORY WEEKLY. At the rate you were going recently, the name could have been safely changed to the *Argosy Western Story Weekly*. I can't see why you do not print stories as described by the name *All Story*. For instance, a comedy, a mystery, a drama, a story of adventure, and a Western story. Your other stories are too good to be pushed aside by Westerns.

Why not publish a few more stories like "Luck," "The Great Commander," "On to Florida," "The Print of a French Heel," *et cetera?*

I would not want the entire discontinuance of the Western story; they are too good for that. But too many stories of one kind will never do a magazine any good.

S. S. R.

P. S.—I have just finished the first installment of your new story, "The Great Mistake," by John Holden, and it has promise of being very good. I think a few more stories like this would hurt no one.

BURTTS CORNER, YORK CO., N. B., CANADA.

I saw in the ARGOSY your query whether we wanted fewer Western stories. Now, I believe in giving each type of story its place. Of late, your Western story writers have been crowding your other authors off the books. I believe we ought to have more of E. R. Burroughs, James B. Hendryx, E. K. Means, H. Footner, R. Cummings, J. U. Giesy, and others who wrote long ago. Fred MacIsaac is about my favorite now.

H. H.

MEMPHIS, TENN.

I have been reading the ARGOSY for four years and wish to say it is the best on the stands. Let the policy of the ARGOSY stay as it is. H. R.

LINCOLN, CAL.

I have been a reader of the ARGOSY for the last six years and I must say the stories are getting better all the time. About Western stories; I am a Westerner myself, but I certainly enjoy the Western stories in ARGOSY, and I would hate to see them discontinued. I was very glad to see another Semi Dual story. MRS. E. S.

DETROIT, MICH.

Have just finished Part Four of "Moonglow," by Charles Francis Coe, and really can't think of the right adjectives to express my appreciation of it. I have been reading ARGOSY quite a number of years, but no story has kept me "keyed" up from one week to the next as has "Moonglow"—the most gripping story I have ever read. Please give us more. H. E. A.

OSHKOSH, WIS.

I have been a follower of the ARGOSY for over a year and would say that you are putting in about as many Western stories as necessary. Too many Western stories give the magazine an appearance of the *Western Story Magazine*. I would like to know if it were possible for you to put in a couple of football stories or some other branch of sport in the form of serials. I am not "in love" with any of the Semi Dual or "The Great Commander" stories, as it does not seem to me as if such stories were possible. R. F.

ENDICOTT, N. Y.

Hurray for P. A. H.—October 23. He says all I want to say except that I might add "Moonglow" and "On to Florida." If you must publish Western stories, make them of the old days when such conditions did exist, then they're true

to life—"Don Rando'," for example. Have read the GOLDEN ARGOSY, ARGOSY, and the ARGOSY-ALLSTORY, so feel that I have a right to read something besides "hold 'em, gal, we're a-comin'" and "the foot tracks show that one of them hosses wus goin' east and t'other west." Why, they don't even talk that way now!

I hate to skip my novelette, but I have to this time. "Baffling Trails," d—m! "Liberty," pooh! "The Hunting of Wild Gulch Wolf," bah! "Absolute Fool," h—l! The whole ARGOSY spoiled—ruined and only saved by the four continued stories which are all dandies. Let the fellows that want to read something that hasn't existed for twenty-five years buy Western story magazines, and let our family have our own ARGOSY—*which never has been Western till lately.*

Personally, I think you are ill for the time being—but will get over it. Give us more of Worts, MacIsaac, Raine, *Coe.* H. M. K.

BUFFALO, N. Y.

Referring to your request as to the readers' opinions as to the kind of stories desired, let me suggest that you hold to your present system. Keep the variety, and you will keep the readers' attention. I like good Western stories, but stories like "The Hole in the Wall," "You're Under Arrest," and "The Black Past" will please any one.

I am only a new reader of the ARGOSY, and I consider it the best periodical on the market.

D. C.

CINCINNATI, OHIO.

In regard to your query of more or less Western stories, I wish to state that as a reader I have enjoyed each and every Western story since I began ARGOSY, two years ago. As to more or less, I like an assortment of the imaginative, the weird and the new East-Western story. Above all, I like the verse and poems that appear weekly in the ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY. The standard of assortment is O. K. with preferably some good lilting verse. P. W. O.

DULUTH, MINN.

You ask if we want more or fewer Western stories. I say print a few more. Stories I liked were "The Range Rider," by George M. Johnson, "The Mesa," by Charles A. Seltzer, "Luck," by William MacLeod Raine, and "The Black Past," by Fred MacIsaac. Please print more Northern stories. M. L.

McGEHEE, ARK.

Don't ruin a good magazine with too many Western stories. If you must fill it with Western stories then make a *Western* and a *Sensible Argosy.* O. W. C., JR.

SOUTH WEYMOUTH, MASS.

Being one of your oldest readers, would like to say a word as to your stories, present management, *et cetera.*

The past ten or fifteen years have brought many changes which I do not like, but as long as you continue to issue so large a variety of stories as now appear in the ARGOSY, I am satisfied and content. If I should lose the pleasure of reading stories from such all star authors as Richard Barry, C. F. Coe, Fred MacIsaac, George F. Worts, Charles Wesley Sanders, John Holden, George M. Johnson, J. Ivers Lawrence, and Kenneth Perkins, I'd think it time to quit.

I don't know which kind of story I like best. They are all good. Fred MacIsaac seems to have the largest variety, but I also like sea and fur trading in the great North stories also.

If your publication was fifty cents, instead of ten cents, I'd walk five miles for it just the same.

F. T. W.

LINDEN, W. VA.

I have been reading ARGOSY-ALLSTORY for two years and can say it is my favorite magazine. I am most interested in Western stories. I like authors like Kenneth Perkins, Charles Francis Coe, George M. Johnson, and Charles Alden Seltzer. More Western stories the better, I say.

W. M. S.

BRIDGEPORT, CONN.

In regard to Western stories, I have read the ARGOSY for many years. Personally I like one Western story all the time. I also like stories of the Northwest Mounted Police and other Northern stories of northern Canada. I think one detective story each issue would be good. Give us a Western story by Zane Grey or Charles Alden Seltzer. All of your stories are good. There is no doubt about the variety. With one story of each kind to an issue, you should be able to please all kinds of readers. D. S. H.

OZONE PARK, N. Y.

I have been reading ARGOSY for over a year, and I like the general run of stories. It is very difficult to find an original Western story. It is always the same old bunk. I like stories with a little humor in them, and also mystery stories.

I think that "You're Under Arrest" is the best story I ever read in ARGOSY in a long time.

I am sending in a year's subscription.

H. L. K.

SAVANNAH, GA.

Having just read the letter from Clara A. O., from Brooklyn (October 30), I feel that I must take it upon myself to answer it. "Moonglow" is indeed the Hermitage. Mr. Coe has described it perfectly, also Savannah as it is to-day. I have lived in Savannah all my life, and I assure you it is a beautiful city. But no longer a sleepy Southern town. Savannah is very wide awake and is growing rapidly in every respect.

Please let me say here that I think you publish enough Western stories. Let the ARGOSY remain as it is, giving us a variety of stories. I feel that one can gain a liberal, broad education just from reading the ARGOSY each week. MRS. R. G. B.

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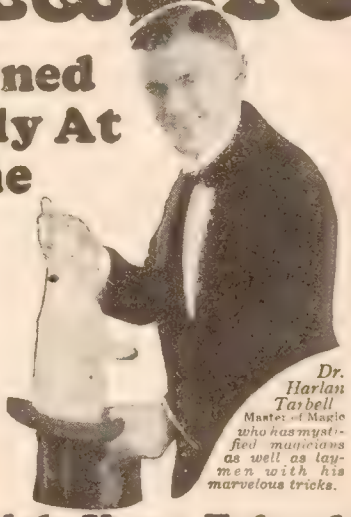

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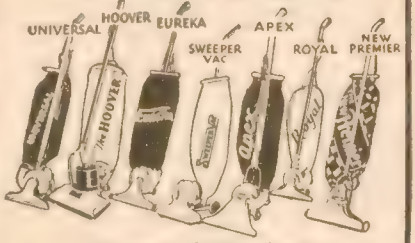

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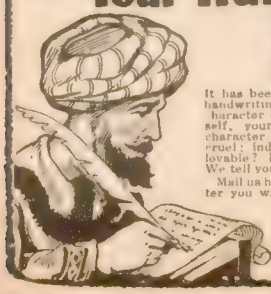

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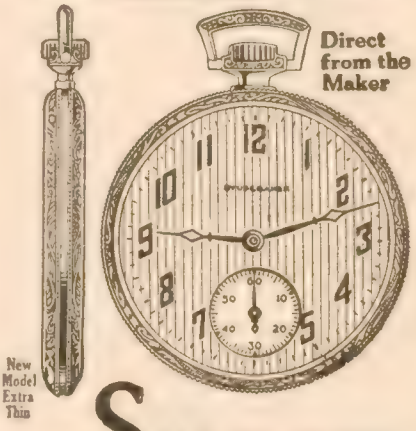

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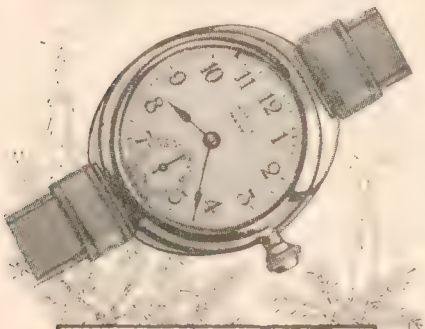

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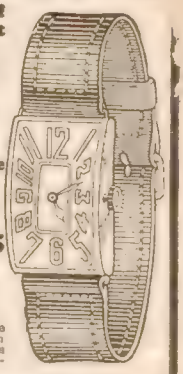

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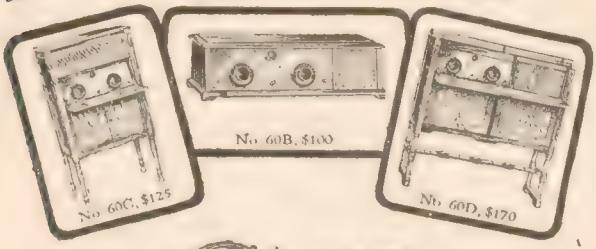

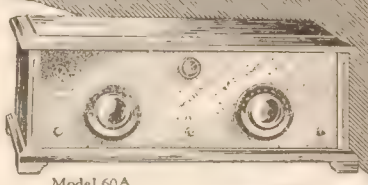

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Send number of ring, size of finger, initial or emblem desired, and ring will be sent for inspection.

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Wahl Fountain Pen Desk Sets from $7.50 to $30. Set illustrated, marble or glass base, two pens, $30.00

The Gifts that Santa Claus Himself would Choose

Here are gifts that echo Merry Christmas all the year around √ Wahl Fountain Pen Desk Sets and Wahl-Eversharp Writing Sets √ √ The desk sets are something entirely new √ √ A single gracefully tapered Wahl Fountain Pen, or a pair of them, perfectly balanced to the hand and set on a base of imported Italian Portoro Marble, Emeraline Glass, or Pearl Amerith √ √ Ball and socket joints that permit turning the pens to any angle or elevation √ √ Wahl-Eversharp Writing Sets—a Wahl Pen nested in an attractive gift box with its companion Eversharp—are *write* gifts for everybody √ √ At Wahl-Eversharp counters everywhere.

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EVERSHARP and WAHL PEN

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The first requirement of holiday etiquette

THE use of Christmas Seals is more than the *correct* thing to do. It is the *right* thing to do.

In a few short years, the organized health work of the Tuberculosis Associations has helped to cut the tuberculosis death rate by more than half. This work is financed by the sale of Christmas Seals.

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THE NATIONAL, STATE AND LOCAL TUBERCULOSIS ASSOCIATIONS OF THE UNITED STATES

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WHEN the supply ship steams south from the last outpost of northern civilization in September, not to return until the following July, loneliness will never again beset the lives of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police who patrol that vast, wild area.

Radio is now brightening the long winter nights with music, special programs, messages and greetings from their "home folks." And in the receiving sets of the "Mounties" is the best equipment obtainable. The batteries they use *must* be dependable. They *must* serve until new supplies are brought in a year later.

Ask Any Radio Engineer

BURGESS BATTERY COMPANY

GENERAL SALES OFFICE: CHICAGO

Canadian Factories and Offices:
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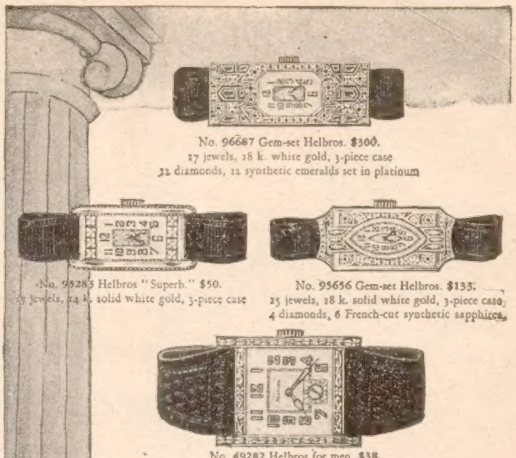
BURGESS RADIO BATTERIES



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32 diamonds, 12 synthetic emeralds set in platinum

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15 jewels, 14 k. solid white gold, 3-piece case

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What STYLE means

STYLE in watches—as in dress, in decoration, in motor cars—means the inseparable blending of innate dependable quality with novel freshness of appearance. In the new Helbros Watch fashions, you will find not alone artistic sureness of design but also unfailing accuracy of time-keeping mechanism.

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Helbros Watches

For a
MERRY CHRISTMAS
and a
BRIGHT NEW YEAR

HERE is the present with a past. It has proved its acceptability as a gift for everybody, from six to sixty, year after year. Eveready Flashlights are extremely good-looking—intensely useful—inexpensive.

This is the ideal combination for Christmas giving! An Eveready Flashlight!

Save wandering and wondering this year by deciding right now to give an Eveready Flashlight to everyone on your list. It will brighten their lives every day and night in the year. It will guard their steps in the dark and lighten the nightly chores.

To be sure of the newest and best flashlight features, insist upon getting genuine Evereadys. Only Eveready has the new, convenient ring-hanger for hanging up the flashlight when not in use — the greatest single flashlight improvement in years.

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You cannot give *more* and spend *less.* You cannot choose a gift more universally welcome to men, women and children. Give Evereadys this Christmas to everyone on your list. You'll be glad you did . . . and so will they who receive them!

There's an Eveready Flashlight for every purpose and purse, and an Eveready dealer nearby.

Manufactured and guaranteed by
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THE RING-HANGER
This is an exclusive Eveready feature. Hinged, metal ring in end-cap for hanging up flashlight when not in use. Ring snaps securely closed, out of the way, when flashlight is in action.

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THAT LAST ALL YEAR!

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It is one that will last all year, and each issue of the magazine will serve as a constant reminder of your thoughtfulness and friendship.

Such a gift will be a constant source of pleasure to the recipient, and will save you the trouble of shopping, of waiting around in crowded stores, of wrapping, addressing and mailing. We will send a beautiful greeting card announcing the gift in your name, so that the magazine and greeting card are both delivered on Christmas morning.

Do your Christmas shopping from home. Fill out the coupon, attach your remittance, and send it to us. No more worry or bother, we do all the work.

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY is a clean magazine planned to please the whole family—no other fiction publication contains a higher standard of literary excellence. Each issue contains 160 pages of the best selection of mystery, romance, love, adventure and humor ever printed.

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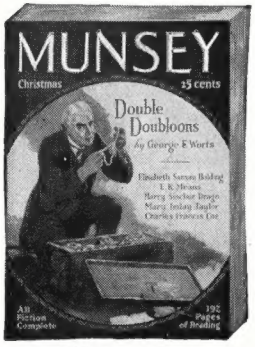

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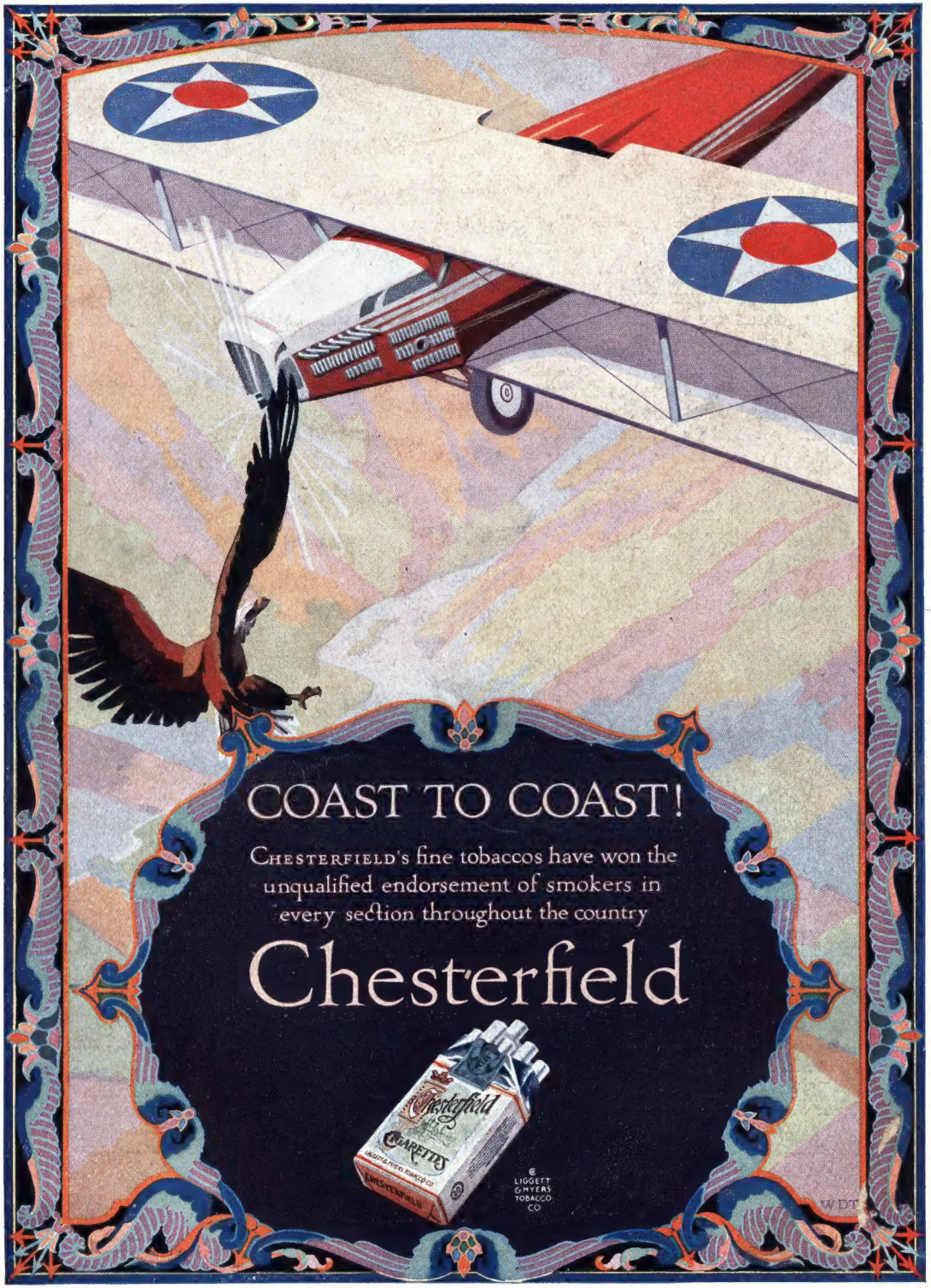
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